

Mothers and Selves

The Mother-Daughter Relationship

in the Female Quest for Self

By

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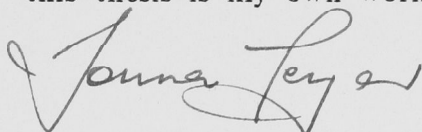
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Declaration

Except where otherwise indicated

this thesis is my own work.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Donna Ruth Isabelle Meyer".

Donna Ruth Isabelle Meyer

16th April 1987

Dedication

For Charlotte Heather Jane

To
a small girl child
who may live to grasp
somewhat of that which for
us
is yet sight, not touch.

Olive Schreiner

Acknowledgements

This Thesis and I would not have made it through the last two years without the help of some very good friends. Thanks to Vivienne Foster, Leonie Rutherford, and Nicolas Reid for Tea, talk, sympathy and typing. Thanks also to my grandmother Ruth Meyer, to Heather Morrison, Jane Campbell and Peter Looker for Books and thoughts and moral support. Trish, Deborah and Ivan Meyer, Anthony Whitbourne and David Buckley provided love and care for Charlotte and me, that gave me time to work, and to contemplate the precious gift of a family. Dr. Rich Pascal corrected spelling, swapped baby pictures and ideas above and beyond the call of duty. His patience and advice were much appreciated. There are those whose moment in our lives is to shape a piece of the puzzle that changes the colour and the pattern of the whole. My thanks to Viv., for all her sharing, and to S., for words in the German, and stories in the Greek.

Abstract

Many post World War Two novels by women writers can be placed in the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. But when the hero is a woman, both the genre and the placement become problematic. In examining some novels by Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and Shirley Jackson which can be described as female *Bildungsroman*, I intend to look at how and why the quest for self is different for a female protagonist. One of the essential changes to the form and content of the genre made by these writers is the emphasis placed on the hero's relationship to her mother in shaping her quest for self. The Mother-Daughter relationship appears to be central to this quest, and I will suggest some ideas about why this might be so, and discuss some of the implications of the centrality of this relationship for characterisation, plot and structure within these novels, and the genre as a whole.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The mother-daughter relationship is an important metaphor in feminist scholarship and in women's literature, because of its centrality to female experience. It has been used to describe the process of succession within a female literary tradition that exists outside, and in spite of, the patriarchal canon. Virginia Blain, among other contemporary scholars, has questioned whether the mother to daughter lineage metaphor is the most useful way of talking about the ongoing community of women who write. Certainly it is not a model without serious gaps, and from a feminist literary historians' point of view, it may also be ideologically flawed, in that it transcribes power relationships from within the patriarchy and figures in any case as a paradigm within it.

Whatever its value for the acknowledgement and understanding of a female canon, the mother-daughter relationship has been used both as a metaphor and a motif in women's writing from the time of Sappho to the present day, in cultures as disparate as Ancient Sumaria, Medieval Europe and Contemporary Australia. And yet, most of what has been written has passed out of sight without acknowledgement. As Cathy Davidson and E.M.Broner point out in their introduction to *The Lost Tradition*:

We have already heard the story of fathers and sons, of mothers and sons, even of fathers and daughters. But who has sung the song of mothers and daughters? And yet ... we have forty centuries of a literature of Mothers and Daughters.¹

In the twentieth century, the bulk of that literature has been located within the genre of *Bildungsroman*. When the hero of a *Bildungsroman* is a daughter, not a son, however, both the genre and the placement become problematic.² In

¹Cathy N. Davison & E.M. Broner, *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1980), p.xi.

²I have chosen throughout this study to use the word hero to refer to both male and female protagonists because it implies a more active sense of participation in the plot than the more passive "tied to the train tracks" term, heroine.

examining some novels by Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood and Shirley Jackson, I intend to look at how and why the quest for self may be different for women, and portrayed differently by women writers. One of the essential changes to the form and content of the quest novel, or novel of development, as Annis Pratt has retermed *Bildungsroman*, is the emphasis placed on the hero's relationship with her mother. This relationship appears to be central to the daughter's quest for self and thus has important implications for characterisation, plot, and structure within such novels, and perhaps for the genre itself.

While the quest for self is a universal theme in literature, taken up by both men and women writers, Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* being amongst a myriad of works making use of the theme, the basic question of what "self" is, and why it is something many writers feel must be quested for, is a thorny one. The difficulty of arriving at an acceptable definition is both eased and intensified by the coupling of the term with the notion of a quest or search. A search for self can be a search for one's ancestry, as Alex Haley's was in his autobiographical novel, *Roots*, or for a more temporally immediate sense of social place and identity, such as the searches undertaken by Tom Jones and Daniel Deronda. Linking "self" and "search" in this way seems to imply that the self is virtually an object, a hidden object, which the individual must "find". That is to say, that the self may be thought of as something which has an objectively observable existence and a definite nature, but which is not of itself something empirical. But the self, surely, is both object and subject - a permanent subject of varying states of consciousness - what one "is", at a particular time or in a particular aspect or relationship. The language "itself" falls back on "itself"; the possibilities for signification and meaning are "themselves" endless.

The self conceived of as an objective entity allows, however, for a descriptive definition of the "self" and what it may be to undertake a quest for it. In one sense, it is a social construction, a state of being, an identity externally determined and defined that may or may not be wholly internalised. Such a definition lies in opposition to one in which the self is regarded as being inherent and innate, those qualities and characteristics which are intrinsic to and immutable in, a person. A quest for self is a journey along interior plains and exterior highways to discover one's place in both.

The questing theme has been taken up by many, especially contemporary, women writers, but, as Carol Christ has argued, because female social roles are

different, the content of the quest and I would contend, therefore its outcome, is different for women. A woman's quest for self very often becomes the discovery of one's displacement from rather than placement in society, and a retreat under siege to a malnourished interior.

It is worth noting in this respect that questing for self is often the subject matter of those who feel themselves to be at the periphery of society - alien, other, under threat. It is arguable for example, that Joyce's sense of his Irishness and thus his alienation from the European society of *Belles Lettres* to which he sought to belong provided much of the impetus for his writing. That one of the central characters of *Ulysses* is a Jew living in a Catholic country further emphasises the sense of otherness, of being alien, that pervades the book. Women often feel themselves to be members of this alien/other category. While gender is not the sole grounds of exclusion from patriarchal society, the "experience of nothingness", as Carol Christ terms it, is akin to "the ordinary experience of women in patriarchy Women never have what male mystics must strive to give up." And that is, power, the power of self determination and therefore self definition. Like all generalisations, the preceding one is only a partial truth, and as I have already suggested there are other majorities in western society that are denied placement within the mainstream. It would seem to be the case though that [white] male questers in general have a strong sense of their own autonomous value. They may be unsure exactly what their place in the universe is, but they are sure they have one. Most female questers seem a little more hesitant about their ability, or even their right, to make such an assumption. In the opening pages of *Martha Quest* for example, Martha poses herself a question about her future

She would *not* be like Mrs Van Rensburg, a fat earthy housekeeping woman; she would not be bitter and nagging and dissatisfied, like her mother. But then, who was she to be like?³

Paul Morel and Stephen Dedalus may go through similar stages of rejection/separation but they do not feel they necessarily have to be *like* anyone else. Consequently, they tend to be more certain they have definite selves, whereas women almost inevitably doubt themselves - quite literally.

The idea of power then, is crucial to a concept of selfhood. Women's connection to social power has most often been tenuous, dependant on husbands, brothers, fathers, sons. Their status has been granted largely by proxy. Women are habitually encouraged to be self -less, to be receptive to the needs of others before

³Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest* (London: Panther Books, 1967.) p.16

acknowledging or discovering their own. Such passivity effectively denies them personal ascendancy or self direction. They are thus excluded from active questing on their *own* behalf, and are directed toward nurturing the quest's and accession to power of [male] others. Being self-less can mean for some women being unable to discover a sense of self. Women's questing therefore,

is rebellion and the dream of resolution. Her task is the integration of all her parts disconnected as they have been by the socialisation which has repaired her to play the feminine role.⁴

It is a gaining of power, moving towards a sense of herself as a personal being who may transcend the arbitrary limitations of her culture on her individual and independent growth, and find that inner place *she* defines as her "self". That inner state of being, like Lessing's room behind the wall,⁵ will, ideally, coalesce with other phenomena - people, physical and psychic surroundings, events - and be a part of a society which will allow her value, autonomy and growth.

Often, the quest to find and articulate her inner world and determine her relation to the external one, leads the woman hero to retreat from the reality of her experience in society, and once distanced from it, figuratively transform it in order to free herself from its constraints. To this end, imagination and madness create possibilities for arriving at the kind of self knowledge that enables her to envision a better world and cope with one she is in. Martha Quest, watching Lynda's retreat into madness in *The Four Gated City*, realises that madness could be for her a useful way of exploring the inner powers of her mind and gaining a deeper, more radical perception of the world. Helping Lynda recover some kind of functioning normalcy, Martha makes a conscious decision to retreat from the world and so called normal rational thoughts and behaviour and "plug in" to her inner voices.

In *Surfacing*, Atwood's protagonist works through a similar time of madness. She makes a choice to retreat into another world - to find a transcendent, transcendental self; one that is not subject to the limitations of her external material universe. She is no longer confined by language, by categories of "human", "animal", and is thus able to attain a heightened, almost visionary sense of her world and her self:

I lean against a tree, I am
a tree leaning

⁴Ellen Morgan, "Human becoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel", in Brown & Olson, (ed.s) *Feminist Criticism*, (Metuchen N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1978) p.272

⁵I refer here to *Memoirs of a Survivor*

I break out again into the bright sun and crumple, head
against the ground

I am not an animal or a tree, I am a thing
in which the trees and animals move and grow,
I am a place⁶

In this passage, Atwood shapes the rhythm and the structure of her sentences to mark this moment in her character's development. Even the typesetting has been used to reinforce this momentary vision. At the conclusion of the novel, she can move back into the world, bringing with her what she has learned:

"The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death." [*Surfacing*, p.191]

Withdrawing may be no longer "possible" for the hero of *Surfacing*, but it is the favoured response of many others. Madness can figure as a form of permanent retreat or escape, albeit one that women are perhaps pushed into rather than one they actively choose. Shirley Jackson frequently portrays madness as an effective means of coping with not coping; a tactical retreat into an other, self-created world which is at best only tangential to social reality. Mary Catherine in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, lives in a world of magic signs and buried treasure, closing herself off from the fact that she murdered most of her family. Any threat to her private fantasy life is promptly dealt with - she burns the house down to eradicate the cousin whom she feels means no good, who comes to inflict change upon her precious order. What is real and what is not become so entangled that Mary Catherine's madness becomes her reality and eventually her sister's, too.

While the inner quest is of great importance, the social implications of their self-seeking are never wholly disregarded by a woman quester. Indeed, she seeks to create a self-image that will enable her to attain personal fulfillment, and which is congruent with the world outside herself. This quest is a quest for knowledge of, and harmony between, her inner world and her social identity. For a woman quester, the central difficulty is often portrayed as the struggle to unite these things.

This struggle is a reflection of a definitive problem with a female *Bildungsroman*. As a genre, the *Bildungsroman* has as its theme the integration of the individual into his/her society, but for a woman, this defining theme is radically modified by cultural traditions which create a society unwilling to assimilate her, except on terms inimical to her personal development. The male quester becomes aware of himself as he relates to the objective world outside his subjective

⁶*Surfacing*, (London: Virago, 1979) p.181. Hereafter all references to this work appear in the text in parenthesis.

consciousness. In most cases this awareness is ultimately self-affirming. But the acquisition of a meaningful and freely chosen place in culture is what the female hero is denied. Society generally offers a woman only rigidly defined subordinate roles; therefore a personal story of the growth of individuality for a woman is most often one of self suppression, abnegation, or destruction.

The novels I wish to discuss, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man*; Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, *The Bird's Nest* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*; and Doris Lessing's *The Children of Violence* series, seem to me to be indicative of some of the differing directions in which the woman's *Novel of Development*, or *Bildungsroman* has developed in the latter part of our century. The majority of women's questing stories are stories of quests that remain partially or wholly uncompleted. (Even those, interestingly enough, portrayed by men. Isabelle Archer and Ursula Brangwen are hardly models for achieving fulfillment.) These stories are stories of oppression and defeat, defeat that in the end is accepted as inevitable, even "right".

The female characters who did grow as selves were generally halted and turned back before they reached authentic selfhood. They committed suicide or obligingly died; they compromised by marrying and devoting the whole of themselves to sympathetic men; they went mad or into some kind of retreat or seclusion from the world.⁷

Lucy Snowe is always an outsider, dispossessed of any real or active life and the ambivalence of Bronte's conclusion to *Villette* gives the reader little hope that she will be able to resurrect her buried self, and life. Dorothea Brooke's "happy ever after" is even more depressing, given the potential she is earlier portrayed as having. At the conclusion of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea is buried alive under the weight of marriage and children. I do not mean to imply that self-development and marriage and children are or should be mutually antithetical, its just that in fiction at least, the latter severely circumscribes the opportunities for the former.

Most often, whatever spiritual transcendency and self-knowledge is attained, is subsequently dispersed, the quest thwarted or abandoned. Edna Pontieller, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is awakened to herself as a sexual being and an artist, but commits suicide because she cannot live within her social role and lacks the spiritual, physical and imaginative means and support to live outside it.

Some writers in the post World War Two period continue to write of truncated, diminished selves for women. Shirley Jackson creates a central figure

⁷Ellen Morgan, *op. cit.*, p.273

similar to Edna Pontellier in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Eleanor Vance, whose life previous to the events described in the novel, has been swallowed up by her domineering mother, discovers herself without a life of her own or a sense of her own self and is unable to shape either for herself. It is fear, rather than Edna's resignation, that drives Eleanor to suicide, though for her, too, it seems to be a valid choice, a positive action. Jackson undercuts a positive reading of Eleanor's ability for self determination at the last, however, when Eleanor in her final moments wonders why no-one is stopping her.

As Annis Pratt argues in her chapter on "The Novel of Development" in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*:

in most of the novels of development it seems clear that the authors conceive of growing up female as a choice between auxiliary and secondary personhood, sacrificial victimisation, madness and death.⁸

Both Lessing and Atwood attempt to move away from defeat as the inevitable outcome of the quest. The disjunction between the social and the personal leads them to envision quests that often end with only partial and uncertain social integration, but in *Surfacing* and *The Four Gated City*, the conclusions are charged with images of change and selfhood, of a movement towards "transcendence and authenticity for women."⁹

Both Lessing and Jackson explore the ways in which the self is momentary and fragmented, the ways in which any answer to the great "who am I?" is constantly in flux. Their focus, like Atwood's, is more centred on a questioning of the fixed identities offered them by society. For their heroes, at least part of the journey toward self discovery is made in the company of their Mothers. The Mother figure often figures as a symbol for, and actualisation of, the social options for, and limitations on, women. She may be, variously, muse and medusa, protector, gaoler, inspiration, guide, monster and villain. The woman or women who play the mother roles in the daughter- hero's life may or may not be biologically related to the daughter. In terms of the female *Bildungsroman*, it does not matter. The "mother" is a myth, a social sign her "daughter" is trying to read. In Atwood's writing especially, the mother figure is conceived of in an iconographic way - she is the dragon-monster Joan Foster, of *Lady Oracle* must slay, and for the hero of *Surfacing*, she is the spirit guide giving her daughter a sign by which she will find

⁸Annis Pratt *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982) p.36

⁹Carol P. Christ, *op. cit.*, p.20

a lost part of herself. For Martha Quest, her mother is not a guide or a wise woman, as the mother comes to be for the narrator of *Surfacing*, she is the representation of all that Martha seeks to escape in society and in herself. Mrs Quest becomes a monster figure, the projection of Martha's inner turmoil about who she is and who she might become. Although Martha can intellectually recognise her mother to be a victim of cultural limitations and restrictions herself, Martha feels she must reject her mother if she is to effect her own escape from those same limitations.

But the problem is, if you can't be like mother, who shall you be? It is part of the process of coming to adulthood, as outlined by Jung and others, to separate from one's mother, to perceive oneself as separate and independent. Boys can identify themselves with an other, their father, who is of their sex and thus potentially the same as they. Separation from the mother is easier for male children because they have a model who is not their mother. Girls, on the other hand, identify with their mothers as female beings and begin to shape their identity with a sense of being like them. Coming to independence for women means rejecting the mother but still forming a female identity. They must be able to define themselves as both the same and not the same.¹⁰

One of the major differences between male and female identity formation may have to do with social perceptions of male and female roles. Fathers can exist independently of their children - they can have careers, interests, lives outside the home, all of which may have social and cultural approval. In contrast, motherhood is often the only positive definition afforded women by society. The daughter has been shown few other opportunities for self identity, and crucially feminine identity. While the mother figure is associated with the childhood world every individual must separate from in order to attain maturity, for women she also represents the socially enforced definition of female adulthood. When little girls shape their lives and themselves to be like mother, they are shaping their identity from the example of a life which is culturally depreciated and therefore, perhaps, only half lived.

The female *Bildungsroman* is thus essentially focussed on the mother daughter relationship. The dilemma for the female quester is this - how is one to become free of one's mother, that is, from the particular set of social mores and restrictions she represents, when she is your potential self and few, if any, other definitions of adult womanhood are offered:

¹⁰ Carol Christ, *op. cit.*, p.20

Chapter 2

Motherhood is Power: Margaret Atwood's Monsters and Muses

Mother-Daughter relationships in the fiction of Margaret Atwood are predicated upon a great many unstated socially-generated myths about the Mother as individual and as institution. For the heroes of the three novels I wish to discuss--*Surfacing*, *Lady Oracle*, and *Life Before Man*--it is the perceived connection between the institution of Motherhood and power, over one's own and other's lives, and the presumed linkage between biological motherhood and the natural world and some kind of innate power, that are the shaping forces in the daughter's quest for self. This relationship between Motherhood and power is central to all of these novels, though in many, often disparate ways. For example, to the protagonist of *Surfacing*, maternity is the means by which one is afforded the power to make restitution: to grow into a new self, refusing to be a victim; and thereafter it gives the power to intervene in one's own life. "This above all", she says, "to refuse to be a victim."

The word games, the winning and losing games are finished. . . . But I bring with me from the distant past five nights ago the time traveller, the primaeval one who will have to learn, the shape of a goldfish now in my belly, undergoing it's watery changes. Word furrows potential already in its proto-brain, untravelled paths.¹

The newly conceived child appears to be placed as a kind of faithful companion in the hero's quest. There is a strong suggestion in the syntax of this passage that it is not only the child who is the "time-traveller, the primaeval one," but also the woman herself. She, too, is on the threshold of birth, with the potentiality of becoming a new being.

While Atwood's prose is evocative and sometimes very fine, her plots and characters are often very cliched and, consequentially, flat or clumsy. Her story lines frequently rely heavily on an undefined and unquestioned set of social

¹Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*, London: Virago Press, 1979, p. 191. All further references to this edition will appear in parentheses in the text.

assumptions, especially about mothers. In *Surfacing*, and elsewhere in Atwood's fiction (although not always so explicitly), creativity, self-discovery and childbirth are entangled. Conceiving a child is an act of *personal* creation and re-creation for the hero of this novel. It is interesting that one of the few details we are given about her present life is that she is an artist, an illustrator of fairy stories. Atwood thus raises the spectre of the woman-as-artist. She makes an ellision between an act of artistic creation and the act of bearing a child, without exploring the consequences for woman's autonomous creativity, or self-development.

More developed in Atwood's work are her suggestions about the experience of motherhood as a potential source of social power and identity, and, consequentially, her representations of the mother figure as monster and muse. In *Life Before Man* and *Lady Oracle*, for instance, Atwood creates mothers who have the power to make victims of their daughters. These mothers behave like monsters, whose grasping, mutilating hold over their daughters extends even beyond death; because they have become deeply embedded, and heavily embroidered, in the daughter's psyche. Indeed, these mothers never evolve as characters: Atwood leaves them as unhumanized myths. They are internal creations of the daughter/hero, externalized. Atwood is much less concerned with the *raison d'être* of the mother as an individual woman, and like Jackson, more sharply focused on a daughter's-eye-view. The first-person narrative in *Surfacing*, and *Lady Oracle*, reinforces this bias, although in *Surfacing*, in particular, the prose is shaped so as to undercut the expected position of the narrator as entirely reliable, if not "objective". The reader is alerted in the opening pages of the novel to the narrator's own sense of discord with her environment. The latent paranoia in her voice is continually built upon, revealing that there is a possible disjunction between "reality" and her current version of it. Her assessments of events and people, and most especially her telling of her own life, are thus brought into question.

He's a good driver, I realise that, I keep my outside hand on the door in spite of it. To brace myself and so I can get out quickly if I have to. . . . I've driven with them before but on this road it doesn't seem right, either the three of them are in the wrong place or I am.
(*Surfacing*, p. 8)

It is not so much a case of being in the wrong place as it is being the wrong person. Atwood's hero is searching not only for her missing father, but for herself, for relationships and responsibilities she has hitherto run away from, or denied. The protagonist of *Surfacing* manages to reclaim her past from her own self-effacing reconstructions by turning her mother into a muse to guide her toward a sense of self. The protagonist's mother leaves her a gift, a message-her own drawing, done

as a child, of a pregnant woman-that enables her to move beyond passivity to an active directing of her own life. She is able to discover a new acceptance and knowledge of herself and her world.

My mother's gift was there for me, I could look. . . . [T]he gift itself was a loose page, the edge torn, the figures drawn in crayon. On the left was a woman with a round moon stomach: the baby was sitting up inside her gazing out. Opposite her was a man with horns on his head like cow horns and a barbed tail.

The picture was mine, I had made it. The baby was myself before I was born, the man was God, I'd drawn him when my brother learned in the winter about the Devil and God: if the Devil was allowed a tail and horns, God needed them also, they were advantages.

That was what the pictures had meant then but their first meaning was lost now. . . . They were my guides, she had saved them for me, pictographs, I had to read their new meaning with the help of the power. (*Surfacing*, p. 158)

"The picture was mine, I had made it". Her mother's gift to her is her own past, the evidence of her own creation and creativity. To her mother she attributes the gift, in essence, of herself-a drawing (image) of herself as a baby, a creature with a birth, a destiny still before it. But these pictographs are guides for the future as well as reclamations of the past. "Their first meaning was lost now", implies they have new meanings which she must decipher, if she is to proceed with her quest for self.

One of the means by which the female hero of the *Bildungsroman* explores her potential self and its relation to society, is by withdrawal from "standard" or "normal" social behaviour. In the final section of *Surfacing*, Chapters 20 to 26 portray the protagonist's retreat into a kind of madness, into an elemental and naturistic relation with her surroundings. As discussed earlier, becoming pregnant is an act of self-acknowledgement and of self-atonement for the protagonist. She finally faces her own past actions and complicities and determines her own, active, destiny:

This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord, the blood returning to the ground where it belongs; the moon will be full, pulling. In the morning I will be able to see it: it will be covered with shining fur, a god, I will never teach it any words. . . . Nobody must find out or they will do that to me again, strap me to the death machine, legs in the metal framework, secret knives. This time I won't let them. (*Surfacing*, p. 162)

Whilst she is aware of the tenuousness of her place in society, that is, the tenuousness of her control over her own and her child's survival, the protagonist feels she can now claim for herself, her own power. This power seems to be a hitherto hidden and denigrated affinity with what she perceives to be the spiritual essence of the natural world. Annis Pratt, in her early feminist study, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, suggests that this retreat into the wilderness is an essential element of many novels of development,² and the identification with nature a persistent theme in women's fiction.³ In taking possession of nature as her own, the hero feels she has also taken possession of herself. To avoid being conquered by human society, she chooses to move into the world of the non-human. Nature is a refuge. An appreciation of nature can be retrospective on the part of the hero; a part of the child-world she clings to while confronting her placelessness in male society, while forming an idea of adulthood. Facing this, or not facing it, leads to an escape into visions of her own world within the natural world, or "naturistic epiphanies",⁴ releasing her imprisoned energies by channelling them into fantasy. The hero may regard such visions, such moments of vision as "touchstones in a quest for her lost self-hood".⁵ As Simone de Beauvoir argued:

For the young girl, for the woman who has not fully abdicated, nature represents what woman herself represents for man, herself and her negation, a kingdom and a place of exile; the whole in the guise of the other. It is when she speaks of moors and gardens that the woman novelist will reveal her experience and her dreams to us more intimately.⁶

The green world can be a starting place and a memory, a place for renewal. Her relationship to nature is often at the centre of the hero's self-development, yet as Annis Pratt points out, the green world is usually presented as something left behind or about to be left behind. It is a paradise, lost. The green world thus becomes equated with a perceived state of innocence, one becomes aware of, in the instant of losing it. The intensity of that experience is in direct relation to how much is being lost, and how quickly it is to be taken away.⁷

²Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 13.

³*ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴*ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵*ibid.*, p. 17.

⁶Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 710-11.

⁷Annis Pratt, *op. cit.*, p. 22

Francine du Plessix Gray argues in her introductory essay to *Surfacing* that the wilderness functions as a place of discovery and refuge. What the protagonist finds there is a sense of identity that is beyond human, that "blur[s] all distinctions between nature and humanity".⁸ Such a blurring is expressed in terms of highly symbolic (Pratt suggests archetypal as well) patterns in the writing. Pratt maintains that the woman writer feels she cannot use social and cultural conventions in writing because they do not belong to her. She must find patterns that are hieroglyphic, and extend them with her own emphasis. She often, therefore, goes back to the very ancient, resurrecting old images and symbols that are pre-literary, inscribing them with new meanings.⁹ Atwood, I think, is attempting something in this vein in *Surfacing*. As du Plessix Gray points out, the novel is "laced with religious allusions".¹⁰ It is a novel, she says, of spiritual pilgrimage.

In the novel of the spiritual quest . . . the protagonist undertakes a journey whose purpose is to attain a new relation to cosmic power, to some manifestation of transcendent deity. (*Surfacing*, p. 3)

The hero attains this new relation by moving through highly symbolic and archetypal phases, culminating in her wandering in the wilderness, and her visions of her parents, especially her mother. For her mother's gift to her is "a reminder of the powers of her body";¹¹ the vision of her mother feeding the birds confirming and extending this, in that it makes explicit to the hero that her muse/mother has led her to a recognition of her connection with nature:

Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long . . . in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder. . . . At first I feel nothing except a lack of surprise: that is where she should be, she has been standing there all along. . . . She turns her head quietly and looks at me, past me as though she knows something is there but she can't quite see it. The jays cry again, they fly up from her, the shadows of their wings ripple over the ground and she's gone.

I go up to where she was. The jays are in the trees, cawing at me; there are a few scraps on the feeding tray still, they've knocked some to the ground. I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is. . . . (*Surfacing*, p. 182)

⁸*Surfacing*, p. 5.

⁹Pratt, *op. cit.*,

¹⁰du Plessix Gray, *op. cit.*, p.4.

¹¹Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Woman Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 46.

Throughout the novel the mother is strongly tied to nature. She appears to have a Dolittle connection with the wildlife, a Demeter-like synchronicity with the garden and the seasons. In her daughter's vision of her, here, the mother becomes a bird, wholly translated into the natural world. The image of her as provider of physical and spiritual sustenance owes much to ancient matriarchal mythology. It is interesting to note the several references made throughout the novel to visions, memories and constructions of the mother in relation to the daughter before the daughter was born. The daughter appears to be creating or claiming for herself a place in a matriarchal lineage, that gives her a kind of transformative power, enabling her to make fluid the boundaries between humans and animals, and plants, and objects; between time and state of being. Joe begins as a knapsack and has bear "fur"; the child within her is a "plant-animal" sending out "fronds" and "filaments". Her transformative power provides her not only with the visions of her parents after their deaths, but memories from before her birth. It also enables her to experience "direct union with the great powers of life and death in nature. All boundaries between herself and other forms of life are abolished. She becomes the transformative energy".¹²

I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning. (*Surfacing*, p. 181)

But the protagonist does not remain "a tree leaning . . . the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow. . . ." She takes her spiritually transformed and pregnant self back into society. She seeks to construct a social self that will accord with the vision of her spiritual self she has formed. It has been an issue with many commentators on this novel as to whether Atwood successfully addresses the problem of the integration of spiritual and social quest for women. Francine du Plessix Gray tends to underestimate the elements of social questing in *Surfacing* (and in Lessing's work, too, for that matter). Apart from the statements at the conclusion of the novel which suggest that the narrator will return to the city with Joe, and is in fact committed to forging some kind of connection with him in human terms, Atwood's narrative construction seems to imply that this is a search for connection with others, for a spiritual self that is also socially viable. By leaving her protagonist without a name Atwood suggests that the hero feels herself to be unnamed, without a true place or social identity. By making the protagonist the namer of others, Atwood also suggests that names, or labels, are important, but often inaccurate or misunderstood. The resolution of her spiritual quest has not, however, provided her with an end to her search for a place in society on terms that will not thwart her further growth. As Carol Christ suggests:

¹²Carol Christ, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

It seems likely that the protagonist . . . will return to the city with Joe and attempt to reconstruct their relationship on the basis of her recovered ability to feel. The potential for a deeper relationship with Joe is "a possibility which wasn't there at the outset". But it remains an unexplored possibility.¹³

Both *Lady Oracle* and *Life Before Man* portray mothers of an entirely different sort. Karen Elias Button, in her article, "The Muse as Medusa", argues that the trend to portray the mother figure as a monster from the daughter's-eye-view is noticeable in fiction by women writers from the nineteen-fifties on.¹⁴ The mother figure becomes a monster, she argues, because the daughter "sees herself reflected in her mother's image, in her mother's life. The fear of all the daughters is that in looking at the mother they will also see themselves and turn to stone".¹⁵ In the post-war version of the mother/daughter relationship; daughters escape, with bitterness, guilt and fear, from the patterns of their mothers' lives, but can only really free themselves by "turning the monstrous vision . . . into the artist".¹⁶ Elias Button is using the idea of the muse being also a medusa as a metaphor for the mother search-which I am arguing is an essential element of the self search-as it is explicated in these novels.

The figure of the medusa can be taken as "representative of the reflexive difficulties seemingly inherent in the mother/daughter relationship".¹⁷ The struggle between mothers and daughters is part of the daughter's struggle to establish an identity of her own. A mother's way of life, or even her way of looking at life, is often an unsatisfactory model to use to deal with the complexities of the daughter's own. An examination of mother/daughter relationships within fiction allows for an exploration-or perhaps several explorations-of traditional and possible roles and selves for women. For the female hero defining a new space, incorporating some of the potentialities and actualities of woman as autonomous individuals, can mean defining the social condition of her female forebears, especially that of her mother, as hollow, unquestioned and narrow, and therefore rejecting it, as well, perhaps, as her mother, the person who epitomizes it. Maturity, self-direction and autonomy can thus only

¹³Carol Christ, *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁴Karen Elias Button, "The Muse as Medusa", in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson & E. M. Broner (New York: Ellngar Co., 1980), pp. 193-206.

¹⁵Cathy N. Davidson & E. M. Broner, "The Mother as Medusa", Introduction to Chapter 5, *ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁶Karen Elias Button, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

¹⁷*ibid.*, p. 202.

come about when one has first established a separate space and then come to terms with the past, which is most often bound to the mother. As Elias Button points out, confronting one's own mother, one's past, can lead to a reconciliation, a new sense of one's own strength. The power feared in and afforded to the mother/medusa is really potentially the daughter's own. Confronting one's mother can be a release, allowing for the possibility of other images beyond "the mirror image of the mother's own despair",¹⁸ that the daughter feels could turn her to stone.

While the mother figure represents the daughter's past, her childhood, which she must separate from in order to establish an adult identity, the mother figure is also the daughter's potential future. Little girls grow up to be like mummy, their maternity will be their status in society, their identity. The protagonist of *Surfacing* claims motherhood as a means of establishing her own autonomy. She refigures her own mother and also what the experience of being a mother might mean for both mother and child.

Unlike *Surfacing*, the power afforded by the experience of maternity in *Life Before Man* is not necessarily so positively self-affirming. Lesje's perception of Elizabeth's status as a mother being the means by which Elizabeth manipulates other people's lives, leads Lesje to conclude that only by being a mother herself will she be regarded as an adult, with some voice in her own life:

If children were the key, if having them was the only way she could stop being invisible, then she would goddam well have some herself. (*Life Before Man*, p. 293)

For Lesje, maternity is not the self-saving elixir it was for the hero of *Surfacing*, but instead, she hopes, a cure for a particular kind of invisibility; that of a woman as an individual in society. Lesje again and again throughout the novel discovers the tenuousness of a social self for a woman unless attached to a husband, or to a child, or preferably both:

He's glad, he says that her name isn't Mrs. Schoenhof. God forbid she should in any way resemble his mother or his wife. But instead of making her feel like an entity in her own right . . . this makes her feel like a cipher. . . . She wants to belong, to be seen to belong, she wants to be classifiable, a member of a group. There is already a group of Mrs. Schoenhofs: one is Nate's mother the other is the mother of his children. Lesje isn't the mother of anyone; officially she is nothing. (*Life Before Man*, p.)

¹⁸Elias Button, *op. cit.*, p.

Lesje and Elizabeth, too, are both victims of a socially determined definition of adulthood for women that undermines the formation of an autonomous sense of self. If a woman's sense of self worth is dependent on active maternity she may, like Lesje, feel invisible if she has no children, or, as Elizabeth does, feel threatened by her daughters' coming to maturity and leaving home. The more threatened the mother feels, that is, the more she feels she will lose her own identity if her child grows into an adult, the more likely she is to behave in a constricting and oppressive way. Her daughter, engaged in her own struggle to construct a self and find a social place, will, in response to her mother's behaviour, come to regard her as monstrous, as an enemy to be overcome. Atwood points toward the function and the process of this mythologizing in *Life Before Man*:

Mummy. A dried corpse in a gilded case. *Mum*, silent. *Mama*, short for mammary gland. . . . Already they're preparing for flight, betrayal, they will leave her, she will become their background. They will discuss her as they lie in bed with their lovers they will use her as an explanation for everything they find idiosyncratic or painful about themselves. . . . [S]he will become *My Mother*, pronounced with a sigh. She will make them cups of tea and without meaning to but unable to stop will pry, pry like a small knife into their lives. (*Life Before Man*, p. 250)

The metamorphosis of mother into monster is, then, multidimensional, and, Atwood implies, both proscriptive and responsive. *Life Before Man* places before the reader some of the consequences of the underlying assumption of this monster making; that assumption being, that motherhood is the only power, that "mother" is the only kind of self definition, applicable to women.

But why are these mothers seen as monsters? Do they have a flesh and blood existence or are they, at least partly, if not mostly, a creation of the daughter's mind? And, if so, why? Why do mothers sometimes have to be "monsters" in their daughter's eyes? What is discounted, or simply left out, in the daughter's mythologizing? And again, why?

The mother monster is often a monster precisely because she represents what the daughter most fears, and yet most wants to become: a socially acceptable "ideal" woman. The mother monster is thus very often a specific kind of monster. She is a medusa who, should her daughter face her, would turn her to stone. The sense of claustrophobic paralysis the medusa image evokes is very important with regard to Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, and also to Martha Quest's relationship with her mother, as I will discuss in a later chapter. Atwood's monster mothers--Auntie Muriel (*Life Before Man*) and Mrs Foster (*Lady Oracle*)--are perhaps, as I suggested earlier, not intended to be seen as complex human individuals, as is

Lessing's *May Quest*. Because of this, they are, perhaps, less subtle and more striking in their effect, both on the hero and on the reader. Auntie Muriel and Mrs Foster are thoroughly bad, cruel and destructive; barely pitiable, let alone explicable or excusable. The term monster really does fit them.

In *LadyOracle*, Atwood reinforces this representation by having a "fairy godmother" close by, Joan's Aunt Louisa. In *Life Before Man*, she also constructs a maternal love triangle-good mother, bad mother and daughter-but here the *menage a trois* is less straightforward. The delineation of good and bad is murky. Elizabeth's mother is a rather helpless drunkard who simply cannot cope with life, and "sells" her children to her self-righteous, fire-breathing sister, Muriel. Muriel is made to seem even more monstrous than her brutal insensitivity to the emotional needs of Elizabeth and her sister would have of itself have implied, because of her behaviour toward Elizabeth's natural mother.

Yet her mother can offer very little in her own defence. Elizabeth is thus left in a half world, feeling revulsion for both women, who have failed to give her more positive and enabling images of female adulthood. With no models of love and support in her life, despite her awareness of the grossness of Auntie Muriel's behaviour, Elizabeth herself becomes monstrous in her behaviour towards Nate and Lesje, in much the same manner as Muriel herself. On hearing gossip to the affect that Elizabeth and Nate have separated, Auntie Muriel comes to see Elizabeth:

Suddenly Elizabeth knows what Auntie Muriel has in mind. She's going to go to Nate and offer to pay him. She's willing to pay for an appearance of standard family life; even if it means misery. Which to her is standard family life; she's never pretended to be happy. She's going to pay him to come back, and Nate will think that Elizabeth has sent her.¹⁹

Later when she and Nate are negotiating a divorce settlement she reveals herself to be her "mother's" daughter:

"But I thought we'd agreed that you were going to participate as much as possible. The children need to know that both of their parents love them".

Nate is angry. "You really think that because I don't have any goddamned money I don't love my kids?" he says. "That's pretty crass."

"The children will hear you," Elizabeth says softly. "Maybe I'm a crass person. I guess I believe that if you really love someone you're prepared to make certain sacrifices." Sacrifices. This is straight out of the doctrine according to Auntie Muriel. She shifts her legs. She doesn't like to hear

¹⁹Margaret Atwood, *Life Before Man*, (London, Virago,1982) p.217. Hereafter all references to this work will appear in the text in parentheses

herself using Auntie Muriel's phrases, even when she believes in them. Though Auntie Muriel would have left out the word Love. (*Life Before Man*, p.262)

Elizabeth's telling tales to William-an act which prompts William to rape Lesje-and later her last minute changes to child care arrangements, her constant phone calls about the girls' lost belongings, are a means of inserting herself into Nate's and Lesje's relationship in an attempt to control it. Elizabeth is seeking to escape the vacuity and barely controlled rage and fear in her own life and is using her social status as a mother to place herself in a position of psychic power over Lesje, which Lesje feels she has no authority, no power to challenge. Even though Elizabeth is not Lesje's mother, or even her surrogate mother, Lesje feels her own status as a non-mother gives her no place in which to assert her own autonomy. The suggestion is made that mothers become monsters because they are thwarted in their own lives, and are following the lead of their own monster/mother, and that where Motherhood constitutes the only power afforded to women in society, and a way of defining them as individuals, the mother figure can be manipulative and destructive. It is part of the daughter's quest for self to try to break free of this pattern in whatever way she can.

In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood introduces a further twist to her portrayal of the mother/daughter relationship: the gothic nightmare. A very funny and often satiric novel, *Lady Oracle* tells the story of Joan Foster, closet writer of gothic romance novels in the style of Mills and Boon, who finds her life far too complicated to continue with, once she has accumulated several other, entirely antithetical roles-academically acclaimed "woman poet", and wife of a bleeding heart liberal philosopher who wants to be more radical than the life he would like to be accustomed to really allows. She stages her own death, but things, as they always have done for Joan, don't go as planned. The bulk of the book is concerned with how Joan came to be so many different people, that she could no longer fit them all into one life; and focuses most intently on her mother.

This is a novel about escapes, escaping, running away from the self. In her moment of crisis, at the climax of the book, she must turn and face her mother:

How could I renounce her? She needed her freedom also; she had been my reflection too long. . . . Why did i have to dream about my mother, have nightmares about her, sleepwalk out to meet her? My mother was a dark vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying.²⁰

²⁰Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle*, (London, Virago, 1982) p. 330. Hereafter, all references to this work will appear in the text in parentheses

In this novel, as in her others, Atwood points to the making of a monster/mother out of a woman who has been denied fulfilment in her own life, and also that many of the things a mother may say or do are instigated by the pressure to socialize her daughter. Because socialization for the female is often a process of confining, even crippling, individuation in the young girl, being a "good mother" can cause an enormous amount of hurt. The sage of Joan's childhood, from the dance recital to Brownies, culminating finally in the battle waged between Joan and her mother over her weight, portrays the process of learning social rules for little girls, and what being the one to enforce them can do to the image of the mother in her daughter's eyes. Joan's weight, her "strange" behaviour are ways of preserving herself from her mother's obsessive attempts to make Joan over as her recompense for a lifetime of unfulfilled dreams.

Her plans for me weren't specific. They were vague but large, so that whatever I did accomplish was never the right thing. [...] It wasn't that she was aggressive and ambitious, although she was both those things. Perhaps she wasn't aggressive or ambitious enough. If she'd ever decided what she really wanted to do and had gone out and done it, she wouldn't have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge edgeless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize. (*Lady Oracle*, p.67)

Joan takes over her mother's view of her, living much of her life as a cloud of inchoate matter, unable to form anything of herself. Mrs Foster regards Joan as the means by which she will finally get somewhere, do something, be someone. She becomes obsessed with her daughter as a symbol of her own achievement in the only "career" she really has: motherhood. But Joan it seems cannot ever be what her mother wants her to be. Early in Joan's life she and her mother begin their life-long disappointment with one another. Joan is not a Shirley Temple child when that is what she is supposed to be. At her first Ballet recital she is publicly humiliated because she does not fit the desired body image for a little girl dancing the role of a butterfly. Her mother sets up this humiliation for Joan because she does not want to be embarrassed by her less than perfect daughter.

One of the most insistent undercurrents in this book, is the exposure of the social obsession with a particular body image for women. Butterflies and women are not attractive, sexually or otherwise, if they are fat. Joan's mother tries to enforce this oppression on Joan. In an effort to deny her mother power over her, Joan eats herself to grossness; her mother becomes obsessed with trying to make her thin, even to the point of icing a cake with laxative chocolate. Clothes are declared the second front in the war over what Joan should look like. Her appearance as it is for Martha Quest and her mother becomes a battleground for control over her

life. Joan's determination to be as fat and grotesque as she can is her rebellion against her mother's slavish devotion to being thin and beautiful. Her mother's tears over the lime-green car coat give Joan an initial feeling of victory over her mother, but it is short-lived, as she wonders whether she is merely reacting rather than acting in her quest to be her own person.

She was taking all the credit for herself, I was not her puppet; surely I was behaving like this not because of anything she had done but because I wanted to. And what was so bad anyway, about the way I was behaving?
(*Lady Oracle*, p.88)

Joan is, to a certain extent, her mother's puppet, but she is unaware that her mother too, is manipulated by a set of social myths which deny her happiness and fulfillment. *Lady Oracle* is populated by figures normally regarded as grotesque, or rather made to seem grotesque because they are outside the norm. Freaks, dancing girls, and the fat lady are one and the same, it is suggested; they are all the product of an extreme focus on the female body. Atwood makes a slighting but nonetheless interesting comment about the association of fat and maternity in women. Unstated but certainly implicit is the paradox: women are to be mothers, but then they will no longer be attractive, they will be pushed aside by the daughter they are supposed to nurture unless they can somehow be reflected through her.

Lady Oracle contains a novel within a novel, both are gothic in structure. Joan's novel keeps interrupting the real narrative until it eventually takes over, and the journey of her heroine through the maze becomes her own journey through the past toward some idea of who she is, and who she might become. Linking the two stories from the outset is the mirror use of some stock gothic characters and more especially, gothic devices. Not only do we have villains, mysterious counts, helpless (but fiesty) heroines, saintly fairy godmothers, we also have ghosts. Joan's mother "visits" her after Joan has run away to London, a visit of the spirit because she is a Joan discovers, dead. So Joan is haunted by her mother literally and figuratively throughout the rest of the novel.

All this time I carried my mother around my neck like neck like a rotting albatross. (*Lady Oracle*, p.213)

Joan's husband cannot understand why Joan does not "make something of herself" (p.214), but as Joan herself says, she carries around the shadows of her past, her image of herself is the one she formed in opposition to her mother, which she articulates in terms of the fatness or thinness of her body.

The outline of my former body still surrounded me, like a mist, like a

phantom moon, like the image of Dumbo the Flying Elephant superimposed on my own. (*Lady Oracle*, p.214)

In the penultimate chapter of the *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster becomes her own heroine in what is to be the final section of her novel; the journey into the maze. It is possible to read this interlude as iconographic of Joan's own search for identity, through a series of enforced, or tried-on-and-discarded images of self, all the time being undercut by myths and her own social ideals. Again, as in her other work, Atwood is raising the question of creativity for women, as it relates to self image and self determination.

In the end she backs away from any definitive statement of resolution about these questions, leaving Joan, ever the hapless heroine, searching for some kind of meaning which she obviously can't perceive.

The future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sur it's better for you. I keep thinking I should learn some lesson from all of this, as my mother would have said. (*Lady Oracle*, p.345)

One wonders if she has, or even if she were able to. She has gained some new knowledge of herself and partly reassessed her relation to her mother, but for Joan, as for Shirley Jackson's Elinor (*The Haunting of Hill House*) the quest for self is never fully resolved.

Chapter 3

The Haunted Self: Shirley Jackson's Mother Ghosts

The young hero sets forth with wit and intelligence, only to be punished by an internalised form of self-torture with which she programs herself into atrophy and disuse.¹

Although a very popular author and while many of her stories have been heavily anthologised, Shirley Jackson has been almost entirely neglected by critical scholars. With one or two notable exceptions, what critical attention she has received has been of extremely poor quality, serving only to bury her extraordinary work even further back on the book shelves. Shirley Jackson is probably most famous for her short stories--infamous in the case of "The Lottery"--but she also wrote six novels as well as numerous pieces of non-fiction.

Her novels and many of her short stories explore the fragmentary nature of a self; a personality disintegrating because it was not, in the first place, whole. Jacksons versions of such disintegration have almost nothing of Atwood's green world *etude* about them: they are made of sterner and more horrifying stuff. As Stanley Hyman has pointed out, the very strength of her writing, her power to create and sustain a vision of a developing self under threat from external and internal forces that seek to arrest or warp its growth, has been used to dismiss her achievement.

Her fierce visions of disassociations and madness, of alienation and withdrawal, of cruelty and terror have been taken to be personal, even neurotic, fantasies. Quite the reverse: they are a sensitive and faithful anatomy of our times, fitting symbols for our distressing world of the concentration camp and the bomb.²

For Jackson, then, the images of the supernatural, preternatural terror she creates in her work are metaphors for the more natural terror of being an individual in a hostile society. A writer of and beyond her time, Jackson's fictional rendering of imprisonment in the social cage, that is to say, the struggle of the individual

¹Annis Pratt, *Op. cit.*, p.31.

²Stanley Edgar Hyman, ed. *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, (New York, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1959), p. 19.

(particularly a woman) denied self-autonomy and growth, points toward the concern of later work by feminist theorists such as Betty Friedman, to novels such as *The Bell Jar*, and to the poetry of Adrienne Rich. Jackson, like Atwood, Lessing and many others, portrays her protagonists circumnavigating the cage, engaging in journeys of the interior, of the inner world, because that is all the space they are afforded. In comparison the male quests for self, the pattern here is circular. The male hero goes out into the world in order to find himself and if he returns to his starting place at all, it is only after the journey is complete. A female protagonist it seems, though, must retreat from the world in order to find herself. She is circumscribed by society, not empowered by it, in defining her sense of herself.

For all three of the writers I am discussing, madness is a way of dealing with societal enclosure, a way of slipping between the bars that prohibit and inhibit. Jackson adds a further depth to the madness-as-escape stratagem through her use of images of the supernatural in the patterning of her work. The innermost regions of the mind and spirit become truly an "other" world, physically manifest, and stridently at odds with the "real" world the hero can no longer wholly endure. Jackson's use of the supernatural has led to her work being regarded as "Gothic" in its most bastardised definition, as merely 'ghost stories'. Her use of the Gothic genre in the construction of her work is, however, far richer than the reviewer who pronounced *The Haunting of Hill House* "A real dilly of a ghost story ... full of horror and mystification," seems to have noticed. Whilst mindful of the enormous variations in her style, Jackson's affinities with the Gothic in its classic form are indeed close. In many of her novels and stories she details a Gothic setting - a strange and desolate house, Hill House for example - wild or mysterious gardens, such as those of *The Sundial* or the grounds of Merricat's Castle; or she makes use of some related device in her construction of plot or character - the poltergeists or the violent and macabre incidents - that spatter her tales with dead bodies and bloodied souls. She does this in order to frame her interest in the quest for self. She is masterful in her rendering of an atmosphere of terror and horror, and into this atmosphere she almost invariably placed a hero who is trying to discover herself. Even when she dispenses with a Gothic design, as she does in *The Bird's Nest*,³

The Jackson character, usually a young girl coming of age or an older woman verging on spinsterhood, attempts to expand outwardly, and is most often rebuffed by an indifferent or even hostile world.⁴

³*The Bird's Nest* in Stanley Edgar Hyman (ed.), *The Magic of Shirley Jackson*, (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1965.)

⁴Stephen K Hoffman, "Individuation and Character Development in the Work of Shirley Jackson," *Hartford Studies in Literature*, Vol.8 (1976), p.193.

I wish here to examine three novels, two so-called Gothic horror tales *The Haunting of Hill House*⁵ and *We Have Always Lived In The Castle*,⁶ and an earlier work, *The Bird's Nest*, which does not have a Gothic framework. These three novels have central figures who are indeed "rebuffed by an indifferent or even hostile world." The indifference or hostility that defeats them is personified in all three cases by the mother. In ways akin to the worst of Auntie Muriel's tyranny, Jackson's mother figures have a destructive stranglehold over their daughter's sources of self. The only escape proffered in *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Bird's Nest* is madness or death. *The Bird's Nest* attempts to portray a more positive resolution to the female quest for self but, as I will discuss below, tensions in the characterisation of Dr. Wright and Aunt Morgan flaw the novel, and reduce the conclusion to a rather pathetic, even farcical, tableau, worthy of a bad American situation comedy. The later fiction takes up many of the themes put forward in *The Bird's Nest* but there is no possibility in either *The Haunting of Hill House* or *We Have Always Lived in The Castle* that the hero will stroll off happily into the night.

In general, Jackson's work illustrates an interesting and important point about the mother figure: as a shaping force in her daughter's life, her power extends even beyond the grave. Death does not end the mother's power over her daughter, even if the daughter choses not consciously to remember or acknowledge her. The mother figure is as much a product and subject of her daughter's psyche as she is maker of it. As with Atwood's heroes, once internalised by the daughter, the mother figure's power over her life goes on, in perpetuity. Her power is to deny her daughter the potential for independent self-hood by imposing on her that very same cultural (and ultimately spiritual) cage, in which she herself was imprisoned and in which she too was denied autonomous growth.

It may be illuminating to note at this point that in a great many popular girl's classics the mother of the heroine is dead, or otherwise disposed of. Heidi, Pollyanna, Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Anne of Greengables, Katy, Dorothy and Nancy Drew all take charge of their own lives when their mothers are absented from authority over them. It is, as Jacqueline Berke argues, the ultimate adolescent girl's fantasy, to be freed, as these heroines are, from one's mother.

What these heroines have in common is their motherless state, a pre-condition, it may be, of their own flowering.

Beyond such adolescent dreaming of a freedom from rules and painful business; success may be only vicariously or very tenuously achieved. Jackson's work demonstrates the underside of such a fantastical *crie de coeur* as "Mother I can do it myself." The daughter, freed of her mother by death as Jackson's three heroes are, does not necessarily become an independent adult. Eleanor, Elizabeth and Merricat are crippled before they are released and remain fettered by their memories and internalizations of their mothers. Their sense of self is flawed too badly for them to survive. Only Elizabeth does, after splitting herself into several personalities and confronting her mother and her past, before pulling away and constructing

⁵Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Popular Library, 1959).

⁶Shirley Jackson, *We Have Always Lived In The Castle* (New York: Viking, 1962).

herself into an entirely new individual, so new that she must choose a new name.

Indeed it is the very idea of naming, of shaping one's own identity by external factors such as names, that is at the crux of *The Bird's Nest* on several levels. The title of the novel comes from a children's rhyme that is a favourite of the hero as a child: "Elizabeth, Beth Betsy and Bess, they all went together to find a bird's nest" [p.201

. Jackson uses this rhyme not only to structure her narration and her characterizations of the hero but also, I believe, as a statement of her main focus: Elizabeth, divided of self as she is, is on a search for a nest, the image of the nest implying maternity and "home" and also, because it is a *bird's* nest, liberty from her self division, freedom, and autonomy. We are alerted early in the novel to the fact that Elizabeth's identity is determined entirely by external forces. She appears to have no intrinsic sense of who she is and thus appears to those around her as undefined:

Her aunt forbore to comment on her own uneasy sense that it might be easier to identify Elizabeth in some firmer manner if Elizabeth were located in a concrete spot (my niece Elizabeth, who works at the museum) rather than being merely herself and so very obviously unable to account for it. [p. 152.]

The Bird's Nest portrays Elizabeth's disintegration into several separate personalities, each of whom adopts a different variant of the generic "Elizabeth." The original Elizabeth is unaware of the many different personalities she has locked within her. It is only when her external frame of reference is altered (the hole is knocked in her office wall) that these other selves begin to surface. Her identity, her sense of herself, such as it was, gapes like the hole in the wall and her inner self slips out between the layers of her social being to reveal extremes of "good" and "evil," child and adult, all manifestations of a youngwoman who is also an adolescent girl, searching desperately to reclaim her mother from a traumatic past. Elizabeth has repressed all of this; she is absent from the Betsy, Beth and Bess that dwell within her and are part of her. No synthesis is possible until she can reclaim her mother and acknowledge her separateness from her - a separateness which, rather than face, she has attempted to evade by splitting herself into four people.

In order to establish one's own sense of self, one must first separate from one's own mother. Jung's work suggests that for all children, perceiving oneself as not the same as mother is a crucial step in the formation of a sense of one's own autonomy. In his study of the mother archetype, Jung implies there are two relationships between mother and child and therefore two separations that must take place from two mothers - the personal mother is crucially important to the self, but

as important as the traits and attitudes which are hers (whatever their source, and that in itself is another story, another mother) are those which she only seems to have, that are projected onto her by the child. She is as much myth as she is real. She is, Jung says, an unconscious formulation and projection of mythology, "occasioned by fairy tales and accidental remarks."⁷ As the fairy tales and accidental remarks the child takes up are social productions and reproductions with an accidental history of their own, the mother thus has an "archetype projected upon her, which gives her a mythological background and invests her with authority and numinosity."⁸ Latent in Jung's observations of the daughter's relationship to her mother, in particular, is the suggestion that for daughters there is a third relationship, mother-separation. Whatever a woman's own struggles with her own identity she is, for her daughter, named as mother, as power. "For a woman," Jung maintains "the mother typifies her own conscious life as conditioned by her sex."⁹ So she is not only past, she is also potentially destiny. The naming of herself in opposition to such a being, is for some daughters an almost impossible task.

The process of naming takes place on two levels. Naming is essentially a social interface: generally chosen for you, a name becomes a symbol of who you are and of your placement within a particular set of relationships. A name is the marker of an individual in a society. Under the dominance of Betsy, Elizabeth runs off to New York to search for her mother. Betsy is aware that this journey is important to her to establish who she is and that she belongs.

It was then urgently important to be some person; in all the world she was entering there was not anyone who was not some particular person; it was vital to be a person. [p. 226]

The act of naming is in another sense, though, an act of personal, of self-affirmation. One asserts oneself as an identity with a social place when one chooses to be named. The narrator of *Surfacing* is nameless and is therefore in her own mind (in her own story) manifestly without a real place in society. Lesje is also aware of the power of names. The naming of dinosaurs is for her a conjuring trick that summons a world far preferable to her own. Her own name, alien in the culture in which she dwells, signifies her own alienation, not only from those who read her name, and therefore her, as mysterious and exotic, but also from herself. Her name does not fit any of the categories to which she wants to belong (like the Mrs. Schoenhoff's, for example).

⁷C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959) p.83

⁸*ibid.*, p.83

⁹*ibid.*, p.105

In *The Bird's Nest*, Jackson links the problem of naming with that of separation from the mother. As discussed earlier, the plot and structure of this novel pivots upon the division of one name, Elizabeth, into several distinct parts, distinct personalities. The name is manifestly divided, fractured: no autonomous whole is possible. Her name and her history, even parts of her personality, are derivative of and inseparable from her mother for Elizabeth. She claims her mother as a version of herself. Betsy, like all the others who cohabit within Elizabeth's name, is not a person, but a fragment of her mother. She elides the two into one.

If I had a husband then my mother could marry him and we could all hide together and be happy. My name is Betsy Richmond. My mother's name is Elizabeth Richmond. Elizabeth Jones before I was married. [p. 236.]

As Elizabeth's unravelling of her past in the persona of Betsy reveals, her obsession with her mother is complicated by the shadows cast by Robin, her mother's lover. While Jackson never explores the full implications of Robin's presence as a complicating factor in the relationship between Elizabeth/Betsy and her mother, he functions, in Betsy's memory at least, as a terrible threat to Betsy's closeness to her mother, as a rival for her mother's time and love, whom she blames for her mother's abandonment of her. There are also several oblique suggestions that Tobin's relationship with Betsy may have been incestuous, which may explain why she finds memories of him so traumatic. It is the horror of remembering Robin that causes disruptions in Betsy's search for her mother, and allows the last, most angry and violent personality to emerge.

As we later learn, Elizabeth's mother has abandoned her first for her lover and then by dying. Elizabeth has been cut off from seeing her mother with any objective or adult clarity; she must remain the perfect magical childhood companion Betsy so desperately wants to reclaim. All of Elizabeth's other reactions to her mother - her anger (Bess), her misplaced guilt and insecurity (Beth) have led Elizabeth to assume a numbed state, only half alive, so that like the protagonist of *Surfacing*, she does not feel what lies beneath the surface.

Jackson attempts in *The Bird's Nest* to make Elizabeth whole by the end of the novel. She is supposedly helped along on her journey to a cohesive and coherent self by the psychiatrist Dr. Wright, who is inserted as a narrator for a substantial part of the story. The Dr. Wright figure - that of the purportedly wise father figure - recurs throughout most of Jackson's fiction, most particularly in the three novels I am discussing. In *The Bird's Nest* though, Jackson seems a little uncertain as to what role she wants him to play. He is a narrator like Brontes Lockwood; not to be wholly trusted with regard to the colouring of the detail he so assiduously puts

before us. And as we come to see via Elizabeth's voices there is so much he does not know, and fails to understand. But is he to be regarded as the "Dr. Watson" of this extraordinary case as he so fancies himself to be? At times his mannered, highly self-conscious tone and bumbling actions seem to be placed as comic relief to the intensity of the disintegration and chaos of Elizabeth's psyche. He is too pompous and interfering to be anything but suspect, yet without appearing to do anything of any use at all he winds up at the conclusion of the novel as a hero - an adopted father of Elizabeth and 'lover' of Aunt Morgan, with a very proprietary air about both. His prominence in actions and in word raises questions about normalcy and social behaviour that are never addresses. One is left uncertain about what it is that Elizabeth has achieved, what kind of life she can look forward to with this man as her mentor. There is the frightening suspicion that she may have been to hell and back in order to subscribe to the Doctor's version for young ladies of the Arrowing's "unendurable mediocrity" [p. 168.].

Aunt Morgan too, occupies an ambivalent position in the novel. While she is sometimes an Aunt Louisa, she is also at times, in Elizabeth's view, an Auntie Muriel. Jackson appears to be unclear as to where to direct our sympathies with regard to Aunt Morgan. Morgan also functions as an alternate mother - for both good and ill - in the pattern of Elizabeth's search for herself. But both Aunt Morgan and Dr. Wright are not consistently developed in any discernable pattern and as a result, pull the narration in several ill-defined directions at once.

The final scene of the novel reduces the preceeding three hundred odd pages of intense and traumatic struggle to a facile domestic tale about possession of the empty vessel Elizabeth. Her assertion that she is happy while these two old people squabble over what her name ought to be - both favour variants of their own names - seems a little vacuous. She says she has named herself, but we do not hear her own naming, only that of Morgan and Victor. Throughout this novel, Jackson seems uncertain of her tone where Morgan and Dr. Wright are concerned. The conclusion serves only to make one uneasy about what kind of self it will be possible for Elizabeth to develop. Her assertion that she knows who she is rings hollow as the threesome walk off into the night.

As the climax of the novel each of Elizabeth's selves call forth and say goodbye. Her mother's ghost has been finally laid to rest, taking away with her those versions of Elizabeth that were enmeshed with her mother. She is now potentially able to form a new self, independent of those shadows. She cuts her hair, names the flowers, the stars and herself. While Elizabeth is a self no longer

haunted, and able to move forward in her quest without fear of her mother's ghost, the tensions in the structure of the novel provide a sense of unease about Elizabeth's future that is not part of Jackson's intention. In her later novels Jackson displays a greater awareness of the difficulty of establishing a vital, whole self.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle

We Have Always Lived in the Castle is probably Jackson's masterpiece of extended fiction. Her prose is always tight and poised, creating a narrative voice whose silences come to speak as loudly as her actual words. With deft and subtle strokes, Jackson reveals far more of Merricats madness by allowing her to tell her own tales than any outside voice could have done. The reader is left to grasp at Merricats seemingly scattered and loose threads, an experience akin to trying to examine a painting with one's eye against the canvas, or assessing the size of a field whilst standing in it with the corn growing higher than your head. The novel constructs a different experience of reading, challenging many common assumptions about the nature of stories, story tellers and the truth or otherwise of the tale. On one level the content of the novel is itself involved in that challenge. This is a novel about constructing myths and constructing realities. The ways of reading and interpreting this book are therefore many and varies. Annis Pratt classifies it as a novel of friendship between women - Connie and Merricat - and how their desire to preserve the exclusiveness of their relationship leads them to withdraw entirely from society. Steven K. Hoffman reads the novel as the story of Connie's failure to individuate her personality. With a largely unilluminating discussion of Jackson's work that relies heavily on half explicated borrowings from Jung, Hoffman argues that Connie has failed to develop as an individual in society because she has taken on the responsibilities, at least in a public sense, for the murders committed by Merricat. She is trapped by this and by Merricats domination of her and is thus unable to become an "independent entity" [p. 199]. The major focus of the novel as he reads it is that it is part of the nature of the narrative itself to make many readings and rereadings possible and valid. I feel, however, both Pratt and Hoffman offer only partial access to the text, which may be better served by a closer focus on Merricat and the ghosts that inhabit her four stories.

From the very outset of the novel the reader is made aware that for any female member of the Blackwood clan to form and maintain an individual identity is perhaps impossible. Only fixed and rigid roles are available, swallowing up impetus for autonomy or growth.

we dealt with the small surface transient objects, the books and the

flowers and the spoons, but underneath we had a solid foundation of stable possessions. We always put things back where they belonged. We dusted and swept under tables and chairs and beds and pictures and rugs and lamps, but we left them where they were; the tortoiseshell toilet set on our mother's dressing table was never off place by so much as a fraction of an inch. Blackwoods had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world. [p. 2]

The Blackwood property is weighty and keeps steady against its occupants too. The preserving and cellaring each woman of the household has always done, and been expected to do, occupies the bulk of her time and energy; pointlessly, it would seem, because the produce remains untouched in the cellar, each new generation adding to the store of wasted food, wasted labour. It is a ritual act, whose meaning has been surpassed, whose function is to provide Connie (and perhaps her female antecedents too) some small opening for creativity whilst at the same time binding her to a very particular and limited set of activities. There are days of the week for doing tasks, particular china to use, and rules about using it. Throughout Merricat's presentation of all this is the constant refrain, "Our Mother."

Merricat's world is rigid and codified, it is a game and a story in which there are very strict rules. She regiments her own behaviour, and thereafter orders the world with a quite tyrannical absoluteness. No deviation from the rule is allowed, for that is when the trouble starts. Merricat's obsession with ritual and order is one she has learned from her mother, and taken to extreme. The psychologist Signe Hammer in her study *Daughters and Mothers, Mothers and Daughters* points out that the mother is the first mediator of the child's environment, and it is her total immersion in a self-created fantasy world that signifies Merricat's response to her mother. Her physical environment has been rigidly shaped by her mother who has the Blackwood estate fenced off to keep other people out; and within the closed circle her mother rules. There are rules about how things are to be arranged, how they are to be done, who is allowed to participate. And the small Mary Catherine is almost always not allowed. She had been sent from the table the night of the murder - and many other times too, it is likely - and now, Merricat is "not allowed" to eat in front of any one except Constance. She may only pass sandwiches and cups in the tea ritual that was her mother's, and is now carried out by Constance in the presence of their few visitors. Merricat carries her devotion to the "not alloweds" to the point of obsession: her games about the route too and from the village, her magic words and signs, her rules about where she may go and what she may do, are all a grotesque mirroring of her mother's iron-handed control. Merricat has internalized her mother's capacity for confining and limiting her and

the extremity of the damage done to her is such that not even Connie can break the cycle:

"I am not allowed to touch Uncle Julius's things. I shall have a lining of moss, for cold winter days, and a hat made of bird feathers."

"That may be all very well for the moon, Miss Foolishness. On the moon you may wear a suit of fur like Jonas for all of me. But right here in our house you are going to be clothed in one of your Uncle Julian's old shirts, and perhaps his trousers too."

"No; I am not allowed to touch Uncle Julian's things; I will wear leaves." But you are allowed. I tell you that you are allowed."

"No." [pp.198 - 199]

In one of the most shocking (because of its intense pathos) scenes in the novel Merricat reworks her memory of her dead family, revealing by her transparently obvious distortion of their actions and attitudes toward her just how deeply traumatised she has been. Her need to recall and reconstruct the past in this way is triggered by Charles's threat of punishment. Being punished is apparently something Merricat was very familiar with under her mother's regime. The scene is also one of foreboding. It is almost as if Merricat needs to remind herself that she has the power to alter the past, so that she can then shape the future. Her next act is to set fire to Charles's room in order to eradicate his presence from the house.

It is revealed to the reader almost at the end of the novel that Merricat has in fact murdered her mother and the other members of her family who were involved in her mother's apparently cruel treatment of her. Connie was the only one meant to survive. Constance is Merricat's fairy princess; she is Merricat's "good" mother, providing her with physical and emotional nurturing that her biological mother failed to provide. Constance (the name itself is an interesting signifier) has been accredited by Merricat with all of Jung's positive qualities associated with the mother archetype - she is helpful, benign and sustaining, and always framed by positive feminine symbols - cultivated gardens, trees and flowers, ovens, pots, vases and other vessels. It may be that Connie's sphere has been limited to house and garden because of Merricat's action, and in Merricat's construction, for which Connie was blamed and is still, although acquitted, held culpable. There are several suggestions in the text, however, that Connie was Merricat's good mother well before the murder, that she reads cookbooks for pleasure and is of her own volition as much as circumstance a nurturer and provider. She after all keeps silent about Merricat's crime, destroys vital evidence in order to protect Merricat from society, and goes on protecting her by retreating from the world herself thus allowing Merricat to create her own (un) reality.

In one sense Steven Hoffman is right about this book: Connie doesn't grow,

find her own self. Jackson portrays in Connie and Merricat a mutually limiting destructive relationship. What is important to note is that they are both happy with it, even though Connie experiences feelings of discontent which threaten Merricat's childish serenity. Their roles in relation to one another are clearly defined. Connie is nurturer, Merricat is protector. In this way Merricat is very like the heroines of those adolescent novels about motherless heroines - to a certain extent she has been set free by her mother's death which has enabled her to take on the role of "protecting" Connie. But she has the best of both worlds because she has a mother figure to nurture her, yet Connie does not exercise any real authority over her. Merricat does accede to some kind of personal power; Connie makes the choice to subject herself to that power. She asks herself several times throughout the novel, "What have I done?" The answer would seem to be, most simply, to indulge Merricat in her madness by protecting her from the social consequences of her actions. Why she does this is unclear. Perhaps because Connie herself feels Merricat has suffered enough and it is in her power to atone for a part of the damage; perhaps because Merricat herself has a greater degree of autonomy and control. Her choice to participate in Merricat's madness means she is 'denied' the odious Charles as a potential husband, she is denied regular social intercourse with the village folk, who are all fond of verbal lynchings and large scale vandalism, she is denied Helen Clarke and friends' for tea. Living in a castle and being thought of as so powerful a witch as to have offerings of food made to one doesn't seem such a bad thing after all.

Although she enacts at least part of the mother myth in this novel it is also important to remember that Connie is also the daughter of "our mother." Constance, like Merricat has been prevented from realising her full potential as the result of her mother's dominance. Constance may be seen as the *dutiful* daughter who takes on the traditional feminine role forced on her to the point where she actually takes over her mother's position - at least, in this instance, as far as the physical labour of running the household is concerned. Connie reveals her resistance to her mother by developing her talents in an area in which her mother can have no part:

"What was wrong with Mrs. Blackwood doing her own cooking?"
 "Please." Uncle Julian's voice had a little shudder in it ... "I personally preferred to chance the arsenic," Uncle Julian said. [p.50]

Merricat's action has liberated them both, which may explain Connie's willingness to accept culpability for it, why she aided and abetted Merricat, albeit after the fact.

"It was Constance who ran them dying around her like flies ... and never called a doctor until it was too late. She washed the sugar bowl."
 There was a spider in it," Constance said.

She told the police those people deserved to die." [pp. 52-53]

It is almost as if Merricat and Constance are inversionns of each other, each representing inverted possibilities of mother dominancy. Ther each form their standards of behaviour in reponse to their mother and can be seen in the novel to form a kind of Yin/Yan paradigm; 'good' and 'evil,' 'duty' and 'rebellion,' 'nurturing' and 'destruction.' Both of their responses end up in madness. Merricat points to this inversion early on the novel:

Constance had worked all her life - at adding to the food in the cellar, and her rows and rows of jars were easily the handsomest and shone among the others. "You bury food the way I bury treasure," I told her sometimes." [pp. 60-61]

Cooking and preserving are Connie's skills; the exercise of her creativity, her strength. She has managed to claim some affirmation from the traditional role of nurturer, but the cultivation of the possible strengths the role may offer is abbreviated and the fixated:

All the Blackwood women had taken the food that came from the ground and preserved it; and the deeply coloured rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women. [p. 61]

A poem, certainly, and a thing of beauty, but also of inexorable waste, of denial and anonymity:

we never touched what belonged to the others; Constance said it would kill us if we ate it."

The preserves, like the women perhaps, are poisoned by being put away, unfinished. The achievement of these generations of women is lost to their successors - each denying the worth of her predecessor's work, and having nothing else to do, the each do it all again - until the good of it is lost altogether. Connie and Merricat are the last of the Blackwood women, however, and the store of food Connie has laid down will enable them to survive after the holocaust Merricat makes of their lives. Circumstances arrange themselves such that the villagers supplement their garden and their horde with offerings - probably to assuage their guilt, though Merricat attributes it to fear of her (and Connie's) power to destroy them. Everyone believes Connie guilty of the multiple murders. Merricat rests quietly behind Connie's skirts and pulls the strings. While Connie is the epitome of feminine duty and passivity, Merricat is the do-er. The interchanges between these two with regard to the murder are extraordinary:

... I said to Constance, "I am going to put death in all their food and watch them die."

Constance stirred, and the leaves rustled. "The way you did before?" she asked.

It had never been spoken of between us, not once in six years.

"Yes," I said after a minute, "the way I did before." [p.161]

"... Merricat," she said, looking up suddenly.

"Yes, Constance?"

"I want to say Im sorry. I was wicked last night."

I was still and cold, looking at her and remembering.

"I was very wicked", she said. "I should never have reminded you of why they all died." [p. 190]

Connie apologises for reminding Merricat of the fact that Merricat murdered four people and incapacitated another, with deliberate and calculated intent.

"I put it in the sugar"

"I know. I knew then."

"You never used sugar."

"No."

"So I put it in the sugar."

Constance sighed. "Merricat," she said, "we'll never talk about it again. Never."

I was chilled, but she smiled at me kindly and it was all right.

"I love you, Constance," I said.

"And I love you, my Merricat." [p.191]

There is another way of interpreting Connie's apology. She may be sorry for having called to mind the suffering that was the reason why Merricat killed them.

Throughout the novel, Merricat places herself as Constance's protector. She takes over many of the so called masculine tasks of household maintenance, and eschewes stereotypically feminine concern with her appearance, informing us in the opening sentences of the novel that she dislikes washing herself "and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and *Amanita phalloides*, the death-cup mushroom" [p.1]. Her constant notations about the Blackwood women, coupled with the more tom-boyish aspects of her behaviour, suggest an ambivalence about boy/girl behaviour which is a reaction to the restrictions enforced on her because of her sex. As Annis Pratt argues, it is common to find intelligent, rebellious girls depicted as grotesque in their alienation from the inflexible stereotype of the lady. The female adolescent freak is almost a stock figure in women's writing - in the work of Flannery O'Connor for example, or Carson McCullers Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Frankie in *A Member of the Wedding*. Atwood too makes use of grotesqueness as a way of her hero challenging traditional feminine stereotypes in *Lady Oracle*. Joan Foster's obesity is a battle ground between Joan and her rigidly conformist mother. While Joan is punished, usually by public humiliation, for not conforming to standard female body images, as I have already suggested, her weight is her weapon, a statement of her power over her own body

and also her means of protest against the life choices that are represented to her by her mother.

Merricat is a wild thing, a freak. She has been able to reconstruct the world so that her behaviour is now acceptable, 'allowed.' She has an ally in Constance, a source of external validation and support. Her perceptions of the world and of herself, therefore, is far more stable in its madness than ever Eleanor's was. Eleanor is denied any sense of acceptance to the last, being sent from Hill House being the final act of denial. Merricat on the other hand, got in first, and denied her family their very lives before they crippled her. It was a valiant attempt but at great cost, that of her sanity and her emotional growth. Phyllis Chesler declares madness to be "both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to overcome and reject this fate."¹⁰

At the close of the novel Merricat announces her pity for the world outside their enclave. "'Poor Stranger,' I said. 'They have so much to be afraid of.'" One is inclined to say Merricat doesn't have much to be afraid of because she has eliminated from her world anything that could threaten her equilibrium, including the rest of the human race. The tone throughout her narrative is that of a twelve year old child - she has frozen herself, emotionally, at the age she was when she murdered her family. Her madness offers her an alternative to the world in which her family sought to lock her. Connie, equally oppressed despite the different manifestation of that oppression, has chosen to follow Merricat's lead into another kind of prison, this one has the solace of being one of their own making. They are, undoubtedly, "so happy"; they and their mother-ghost though, have been buried alive.

¹⁰Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*(New York: Avon, 1973) p.39.

Chapter 4

Searching Beyond the Mother: Martha's End to Repetition

Doris Lessing's *Bildungsroman*, *The Children of Violence*, traces in its five volumes the search by Martha Quest for a whole and integrated self. Her journey is shaped by her relationship with her mother who is, for Martha, the representation of all she seeks to escape in her life. She is the driving force of Martha's life in the first four novels of *The Children of Violence*, albeit in a negative sense. Martha is unable to take responsibility for herself, for her own fears and limitations--everything becomes her mother's fault. It is a misplaced blame, as Martha herself comes to understand much later, because Martha makes her own demons. Her mother comes to be for her a dark and terrible force: "the enemy".

While Mrs Quest's own behaviour does nothing to make Martha's view of her seem too far fetched, the social pressures and roles they are both heir to shape Martha's perception of her mother as a monster. In its language, literature and popular culture, society provides Martha with a scapegoat, the myth of the evil mother, while at the same time outlining a path that will lead to her becoming that very myth, herself. Mrs Quest is symbolic of Martha's potential oppression. Martha sets out, therefore, to be as unlike her mother, to reject her, as far as possible.

The first novel of the sequence, the eponymously titled *Martha Quest*,¹ focuses on Martha's attempt to connect, to become whole. At the end of the novel she retreats into the safety of social norms, and marries. Throughout this novel, Martha seeks to assert herself through negative reactions: self-definition in the contrary. Her available alternatives are limited and she seems incapable of extending herself beyond them. Martha observes her mother's "non-life", her mother's self-imposed martyrdom, her obsessive adherence to social conventions and her bullying insistence that Martha do the same. Martha wants to define her own values, but her mother wants her to conform to traditional ones even though she knows that they will cause Martha, as they have caused her, misery and suffering.

¹Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest* (Panther Books: London, 1966). References to Lessing's novels will generally appear in the text.

Martha and her mother fight a war over who is in control of Martha's life that manifests itself in many ways, including Martha's appearance. Mrs Quest tries to keep Martha dressed as a child, and they fight endlessly over her clothes. When Martha takes over the dressing of herself, making her own clothes, her body, and her image become a battleground in the war with her mother, means of asserting her own identity. Interestingly, her first boyfriend, Donovan, takes control of her wardrobe, dressing Martha, literally and figuratively, to project a particular image of femininity that is intended not so much to reflect Martha as to suit their peers. Her body becomes, for her, "a symbol of her psychic identity",² one that is coveted, and occasionally appropriated, by others, placing Martha's autonomy under threat. She often seems to be unable to assert herself against this, seems incapable of taking her own fate in hand. Martha is in conflict with herself over the potential for her life; she is afraid of breaking free.

Martha leaves home to escape her mother, but the geographical distance the move provides does not bring emotional freedom. A string of mother-substitute lovers (that is to say, bullies) fill in the gaps between visits from her mother, in which Mrs Quest re-arranges Martha's room, and attempts to organise Martha's life. The main avenue of resistance to her mother Martha has is her developing intellect, which manifests itself in her voracious reading and, later, her involvement. Her reading provides her with an escape from the narrow world in which her mother is confined, and seeks to confine her, as well as a pointed means of rebellion: publicly reading Havelock Ellis against her mother's command, for example. It also enables her to create a sphere of interest in which her mother has no place, and therefore, no authority. Jung has argued that one of the manifestations of resistance to the mother is the daughter's development in an area in which the mother can have no part, especially in an esoteric, intellectual way. The daughter puts her energies into such advancement as a way of defining an autonomous space for herself and as a way of signalling to her mother a challenge to her power. Martha's long solitary walks and her friendship with the Cohens are other tokens of resistance she offers her mother. Martha's friendship with the Cohens is, for her a testing ground for the ideas and ideals she takes up from her reading and prepares her for resistance to tradition and social institutions. That her mentors are male and Jewish makes them entirely 'other' to Mrs Quest, thus giving Martha a sense of connection and identification with things beyond her mother's control.

Her relationships with men are the embodiment of Martha's battle for

²Karen Fishburn, "The Nightmare Repetition: The Mother Daughter Conflict in Doris Lessing's *The Children of Violence*", in C.N. Davidson and E.M. Broner (eds.) *The Lost Tradition*, op cit.. p. 211.

possession of herself, and a continuation of her battle with her mother. Martha's husbands both take over where her mother (hasn't) left off. Being married is ostensibly a means of separating oneself from one's mother, but in Martha's case she replaces one bully with another and then another, seemingly unable to recognise her own strength and power for self determination. her marriage to Douglas at the end of *Martha Quest* seems to come about almost in spite of herself. While she is capable of questioning the roles offered to her by society that reinforce her mother's view of the world and deny her her own, Martha is not yet able to free herself from her mother's/society's overpowering influence. All Martha is capable of at this point is definition in the negative, and she has nothing much to offer herself in terms of positive directions. As Jean Pickering has suggested, Martha's need to live her own life is constantly in opposition to her mother's determinations to live it for her.³

Martha's developing political sensibilities are closely allied with her desire for personal freedom. Although it would be extremely reductive of the complexity of the issues raised throughout the *Children of Violence* series to press the point too strongly, there is a way in which the oppression of the blacks is a metaphor for Martha's own entrapment in social institutions. Her mother is an oppressor of both the blacks and of Martha. One might say she is an even-handed woman: she treats both the natives and Martha as half-witted children who will cause anarchy and destruction unless she keeps them under tight control. In this, she typifies the attitude of her society towards the native population, and perhaps even, at its hidden base, about women.

Martha dreams of an ideal city, an ideal world. Not wanting to submit to the conventional standards proffered by her mother and her peer group, Martha dreams of new ones in which integration is possible. As her quest progresses through to the articulation of this dream in Mark Coldridge's novel in *The Four Gated City*,⁴ "integration" comes to be more than racial integration, and emerges as, more widely, a desire for connection between the personal and the collective. Martha's search is always associated with larger things--racism, class-conflict and war. Her individualism is always checked by the social world, revealing the basic powerlessness of the individual because of her personal and cultural history. Throughout *Children of Violence* there is a noteworthy connection between personal experience and the

³Jean Pickering, "Marxism and Madmen: The Two Faces of Doris Lessing's Myth, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol.26 No.1 (Spring 1980), p.19.

⁴Doris Lessing, *The Four Gated City* (London: Panther, 1972).

universal significance of those experiences. She becomes increasingly and more acutely conscious of herself being related to a larger whole, a larger context for development than existing social norms allow.

In *A Proper Marriage*⁵ Martha's growing political involvement seems to be an attempt to reach for her ideal world, but it is still far out of reach. The discrepancy between her ideal and her reality grows, and this disparity causes her to distance herself from her own experiences. She views herself as two people, an observer and the object of observation. Her fragmentation is a measure of her unhappiness and discontent and yet is also the means by which she survives without being engulfed by the society which binds her.

Martha's experience of marriage and motherhood in this novel is that of being suffocated--in much the same way, we begin to see, although Martha does not, that Martha's own mother was suffocated and warped. Her mother uses Martha's maternity as yet another excuse for interference in Martha's life, and again Martha's impetus for thought and action is resistance to her mother. Martha's own maternity reinforces her old perspectives and fears as well as creating new ones. She feels herself to be caught in unending repetition of oppression and self-denial. And fears she will become as her mother is for her. Her inability to disentangle herself from her mother and the way of life her mother epitomizes and symbolises, reduces Martha to a state of helplessness and powerlessness against the tyrannies of feeding routines, husband and peers. She comes to question whether it is possible for a woman to be a mother and a person, whether it is possible to escape from the unending cycle.

She saw herself sitting where her mother now sat, a woman horribly metamorphosed, entirely dependent on her children for any interest in life, resented by them, and resenting them ... this is the nightmare, this the nightmare of a class and generation: repetition. [p.95]

In order to break the chain of repetition, in order to not become like her mother, Martha leaves Douglas and Caroline, stepping outside the enclosures of "wife" and "mother" and in so doing, she believes, freeing her daughter. Mrs. Quest's messages about societal expectations have been reinforced by the circle of friends in which Martha, as Martha Knowell, has moved. She feels the lives they all lead to be dead and deadened. Martha decides to get off the ferris wheel that has hypnotised her, that she perceives to be such an important metaphor for her understanding of her life.

⁵Doris Lessing, *A Proper Marriage* (London: Panther, 1966).

Her political activity comes to be a kind of retreat or escape from the atrophy of the rest of her life. But Martha is still looking for people to be "like," and speculates about the virtues of Jasmine as a potential model. Jasmine does in fact provide Martha with the impetus to move beyond the security of social acceptability, to place herself outside the cycle of repetition, by suggesting to Martha that she "just leave." [p.337]

Leave Martha does, but at great cost to herself emotionally. Her child becomes another stick for her mother to beat her with, another means by which Martha is punished for refusing to conform and submit to the "fate of women." We never see whether Martha's actions have indeed broken the chain as far as Caroline is concerned. Martha's leaving places Caroline in the position of the motherless girl which, as mentioned in Chapter 3, supposedly affords the young girl freedom and autonomy. Douglas Knowell quickly remarries, however, and when his second (and "model") wife becomes pregnant, Caroline spends more and more time with Martha's own mother. The reader is never informed what becomes of Caroline and may only make suppositions about the ultimate effect of Martha's abandonment of her role as Caroline's mother.

Motherhood is in no way the elixir it is for the protagonist of *Surfacing*, for Martha. It is entrapment, a loss of self-control. It offers her no possibility of self-development and affirmation, and allies her via shared experience to the mother she is so desperately seeking to free herself from.

As with the mothers of the other female questers I have examined, Martha's mother is linked to her past, her childhood. Each of the questers has sought to leave that part, and therefore her mother behind, and each has been unsuccessful. The way forward for those who were able, was through a reconciliation of past and present, an awareness of her mother as herself a daughter, and a victim. Mrs. Quest occasionally intercedes as a centre of consciousness into the plot of Martha's own. At these moments the reader comes to see Mrs. Quest as a self that was once just as capable as Martha of growth as a person, but has been stunted into a narrowness and grotesquery she feels acutely but is unable to escape. It is as if she seeks to mold Martha into her own image of womanhood to justify what has been done to her.

Lessing makes clear in her construction of her male characters that many men are also caught up in the webs of acculturation and do not develop their full potential because of it. In her struggle with her mother, Martha seeks to ally herself with her father. But sleep is his action and response to his life, his abdication and

withdrawal making his wife even more frustrated and miserable and offering Martha no positive alternate role model. Both Martha's parents remain trapped in their misery, reinforcing one another in their pattern of repression and self-denial.

A Ripple From the Storm and *Landlocked*⁶ focus more fully on Martha's political involvements. Her growing perceptions and understanding of racial and class oppression enable her better to articulate a vision of a life that is far removed from the conventional existence her mother epitomizes for her. But her involvement with the radical political group she joins does little to strengthen her sense of her own fledgling autonomy. She realises that her new circle of peers is just as limited and limiting as her old ones, and fixes her sights on a physical escape from a society whose individual members, even those who believe they could and should, are too incapacitated to change. Martha's England is a land of hope and freedom, with the prime glory of being far far away from her mother. Interestingly, though, the dream of going to England is her mother's dream, England is her mother's home. For Mrs. Quest, who still seeks to live vicariously through Martha, Martha's journey is the journey home to her own girlhood; lost to her, she realises, more and more bitterly, forever. Her disappointment in her own life is as always focussed on Martha, who feels herself to be more and more fragmented, more and more an outsider, an observer. Martha has always thought of herself as two people, an observer and a participator. Her detachment from herself enables her to survive without being engulfed by the society which binds her, but it also prevents her from achieving any unity or integration of self within that society. She develops a way of interacting with the world whereby some essential part of herself, "the watcher," must remain apart in order to protect her from being taken over. Martha is always aware of the potential of losing the self she has not yet found. There is always a gap between Martha's inner experience of a situation and her external response to it. She uses being ill as an excuse to escape from the pressure of people demanding of her that she be one thing or another.

Martha was thinking feebly that to get sick was an act of irresponsibility and disloyalty to the whole group. She was also thinking that it would be pleasant to be ill for a day or two, to have time to think, and even--this last thought gave her a severe spasm of guilt--to be alone for a little.
[p.93]

The demands and complaints her mother makes are, Martha realises, really no different from those made by many others in her life. Martha however feels her response should be different when it is her mother who makes them.

⁶Doris Lessing, *A Ripple From the Storm* (London: Panther, 1966); and *Landlocked* (London: Panther, 1967).

Mrs. Quest went to Martha's dressing-table, examined what was on it, and said, "So you're using rouge now. Well if you're going to jazz about the way you do, I suppose you'll need rouge at your age. But don't say I didn't warn you." [...] "Oh, do shut up," said Martha, understanding with dismay that she was able to take this sort of thing from Mrs. Carson, but not from her mother, to whom surely she owed much more patience and understanding? [p.101]

Guilt and anger are Martha's programmed responses to her mother, her unconsciously learned reaction to her mother's attempts at manipulating her emotions. Over and over again, especially over Caroline, Martha and her mother play this debilitating power game, similar to the one played by Auntie Muriel and Elizabeth, Joan Foster and her mother, and, one assumes, by Eleanor and her mother.

Martha's relationship with her mother is based on the shared assumption that Mrs. Quest has the perfect right to violate Martha's privacy and integrity because she is Martha's mother. Martha may rail against her mother, openly and in her thoughts but she does not challenge her mother's claim to authority. Although she is able to question it, although she attempts to effect her own displacement from it, Martha is still held fast by the mother archetype. Rather than reject her mother openly, Martha seeks to escape her by putting obstacles between her mother and herself, namely men. The right man, she feels, will enable her to free herself from her mother, and give her unity of self. She has very little sense of her own strengths, of her capacity for self-direction or self-reponsibility. It is perhaps more than a little ironic that most of her relationships are with men who feed off her strength. The (child-) men she thinks will find her "self" for her only lead her to the empty space of their own inadequacy. Martha clings to apron strings via a belt buckle; her emotional dependency and craving for nurturing have merely been transposed in socially acceptable fashion from mother to husband. She denies her own power over and for herself and is incapable of moving beyond the passivity she learned from both parents in order to realise who she might be, who she might become. But her mother is still manipulating Martha, especially where Caroline is concerned. More and more, Martha looks to England to relieve her of the trauma of the situation [p.288]. Martha realises that none of the players in this tragedy know how to act when their parts are not scripted. They have acted so long within the rigid roles of social behaviour that they are no longer able to generate responses that are not scripted.

She could remember no novels about it, no plays, no poems [...] There wasn't even any mention of it in the books on "child guidance" which presumably the child's new step-mother used, as Martha had done. [L. 238]

Martha comes to regard civility, "common sense," as a mask for the horror of the roles they are all trapped in, the roles that have become their lives. "There was no escape for Martha until she could go to England, that's what it amounted to." [p. 247]

Throughout the *Children of Violence*, Lessing reveals the discrepancies between the mother as individual and the mother as myth. Mrs. Quest is important as a symbol for Martha's quest; what she represents for Martha gives her enormous significance for the shaping of Martha's quest. But Mrs. Quest is also an individual in her own right. Despite her intellectual socio-political awareness, Martha is unable to alter their mutual imprisonment. Mrs. Quest is locked into her destructive behaviour and cannot locate herself outside her roles of wife, nurse, housekeeper and mother. When Martha's father dies, May Quest is at a loose end.

She sat, slowly, trying to smile, while her eyes lowered themselves to hide their fear, their distress. What was she going to do with herself? How to use all her knowledge, her energy, her flair, and above all, the sudden explosion of old needs which was bound to make itself felt now when at last the braces were taken off Mrs. Quest's real nature--which was gay and kind and sociable? [p. 252]

Martha's affair with Thomas Stern marks a shift in her perceptions and behaviour. Her time with him provides her with a brief respite from the trauma of her family ties. Thomas's quest for himself reaffirms Martha's own. With Thomas, Martha experiences self-affirmation in her interconnection with him, but she is as yet unable to understand or realise the significance of her love for her quest.

Some force, some power, had taken hold of them both, and had made such changes on her--what, soul? (But she did not even know what words she must use) psyche? being?--that now she was changed and did not understand herself.[p. 222]

At the end of *Landlocked*, Martha takes with her to her new life in England a gift from Thomas that will come to be for her what the mother's scrapbook was for the hero of *Surfacing*. Martha inherits Thomas's papers after his death, a manuscript damaged by water and insects, unordered, rambling, mad. Martha in editing the layers of "Thomas's last testament" [p. 279] begins to perceive a kind of pattern that is revelatory of the many Thomases Martha did not know as well as of the one she did. She takes this testament with her, a guide and a companion on her quest for a larger self.

The Four Gated City is an extraordinary novel, set apart from the earlier novels detailing Martha's quest for self by its shift of setting and the scale of its temporal span. Lessing has spread less than fifteen years of Martha's life over four

novels; in *The Four Gated City*, the rest of Martha's life, from her thirties until her death as an old woman, and some time beyond Martha's death, is encompassed. Martha's personal quest throughout this novel becomes extended into a quest for a larger unity than the integration of the single individual into the existing social order. In this way, Lessing moves her creation of a female *Bildungsroman* towards an intersection with the genre of Utopian fiction. Civilization, as Martha knows it, ends within her lifetime. Not only does a new society emerge, but a new kind of human being, with telepathic powers that mean there cannot be in this new society the kind of misconnection between people that there was in the old one. Lessing's utopian vision of a new human, a new world, actually avoids the problem of how an autonomous and far seeing individual such as the one Martha is becoming will be accepted by society. She cannot envisage a successful completion to Martha's quest within the existing world and so places her in a new one.

Martha establishes an entirely new circle of friends, lovers and family, breaking away almost entirely from her old life. In her new life, she moves slowly toward self discovery, becoming increasingly able to synthesise her moments of cohesion of all her disparate parts, her moments of vision and enlightenment, into some kind of pattern. Throughout the *Children of Violence* sequence Martha has been described as having "blanks" in her memory. Martha doesn't look back; she chooses ostensibly to forget most of what happens to her and her memories of past events and people are referred to only in very general terms, and expressed in like manner. Only Martha's mother and Thomas are constantly in her thoughts throughout *The Four Gated City*. Even Caroline fades, although this is perhaps a repression on Martha's part, rather than any indication of Caroline's lack of importance for Martha. Caroline's significance in Martha's life does diminish however as Martha immerses herself in the (non-biological) mothering of the children of the Coldridge household.

Lessing focuses intently throughout *Children of Violence* on what the experience and institution of mothering is and might be. Having portrayed in the first four novels of the sequence its potential to suffocate and warp the mother and her child, Lessing suggests in *The Four Gated City* that the experience of mothering may be an enriching one, that being mothered doesn't necessarily mean being smothered. What appears to be an essential factor in creating and sustaining such a relationship is some kind of distance between mother-figure and child. Lessing has Martha step largely into the mother role with an assortment of male and female children in the Coldridge household in a positive nurturing way for both her and the children. Martha is able to preserve a self separate from her role with the children that leaves all concerned free to choose the delimiters of authority and

responsibility that need apply in any given situation. Connection between Martha and the children is thus an active choice on both parts and has none of the claustrophobia of a biological bond. Earlier, in *A Proper Marriage*, Martha voices the opinion that children ought not to be raised by their parents if they are to develop fully as human beings. This is the impetus for Martha leaving Caroline, and in *The Four Gated City* provides the impetus for the construction of a different kind of family, in which the nurturing of the young is shared amongst a group of adults who *choose* to be there.

At great physical remove from her mother, Martha thus uncovers her own capacity for mothering as an enriching experience. She is aware, though, of her need to explore other facets of herself. Martha has always been aware of, an observer of, her conscious personality, the gay jolly "Matty," that is environmentally determined and belongs to the outer world, to interaction with others. But her inner world remains partly unconscious, and almost entirely unarticulated. "Matty" exercises certain choices in so far as she is able to in the outer world, but as well as the obstacles she comes across there, that is to say, the expectations of others that bear down on her, "Matty" comes into conflict with Martha's inner world, the psyche which exists separately from her external consciousness. "Matty" is like Lesje's socially acceptable category of Mrs. Schoenhoffs; it is Martha's "identity" when she feels under threat.

"Matty" gained freedom from whatever other people must conform to, not so much by ignoring it, but when the point was reached when conformity might be expected, gaining exemption in an act of deliberate clumsiness--like a parody, paying homage as a parody does to its parent action. An obsequiousness in fact, an obeisance.... Somewhere early in her childhood, ... "Matty" had been created by her as an act of survival. [FGC 14-15]

As Martha comes to realise, the inner world behind the "Matty" personality includes a kind of collective unconscious, a set of inner voices she eventually comes to feel she shares with others. In her attempts to unify herself, to find that time and place in which "the oppositions between body and soul, nature and spirit or freedom, rationality and emotion are overcome,"⁷ Martha decides to tune in to her inner voices.

While Martha's journey (to England) is itself an important motif in quest literature, her physical journey away from the scenes of her childhood and adolescence afford her the opportunity for psychic growth. *The Four Gated City*

⁷C.G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the phenomenology of the self*, trans. R.I.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959) p.8.

details Martha's explication of a plot device that appears to be prominent in the female *Bildungsroman*, especially that of retreat into madness. Martha is seeking some essential self definition that is crystallized in that part of herself she calls the "watcher." The watcher is the only part of herself Martha feels to be permanent, the surface of herself seeming to her to be "a mass of fragments, of facets, or bits of mirror reflecting qualitties embodied in other people" (p.365). Increasingly her experience of being nurturer and facilitator in the Coldridge household calls out of Martha her extraordinary ability to attune herself to others, not as her mother had done, living for or through her family, but instead to "plug in" to the psychological dynamics of the household. Her "seeing" and "hearing" become by the end of her life prophetic powers as she comes to realise the continuum of time, action and thought.

Even though Martha gains enormous benefit in connection with her mother role, "she has unfinished business with her own mother"⁸ Mrs Quest comes to visit Martha in England, a visit which sounds in Martha's life like the knell of doom. Dreading her mother's arrival months in advance, Martha is almost incapacitated by depression. The thoughts of her mother's presence as once again prescient in her life bring Martha up against the wall of her past, of the burden of disappointment and guilt on both sides. Psychiatry offers Martha little help with her desperate need to move her relationship with her mother to a different plain. With the spectre of her mother looming over her, Martha falls back into her old passivity, seeking out Dr. Lamb to do it--remember and reconcile her past--for her. He becomes the external authority that will shape her, as she had hoped her husbands and lovers would do. Having been so used to directing her life in negative reaction to her mother, Martha feels herself incapable of making positive steps herself. Her regression is short-lived and she quits therapy, determining to pursue her interior journey alone. Her mother's visit, which is the last time Martha sees her, is thus a catalyst for Martha's journey into madness in order to "see" more fully.

During the time of Mrs Quest's visit, Martha and her mother, as they have always done, mis-communicate with one another almost entirely. They each, in their own way, struggle to move outside their thwarted expectations of one another, but they are each caught in old roles, Mrs Quest even going so far as to take over the running of the household. In the end, the visit served as a watershed for them both, though each in isolation:

Then, as she vanished from her daughter's life forever, Mrs Quest gave a

⁸Carol P.Christ, *op. cit.*, p.63.

small tight smile, and said: "Well, I wonder what all that was about really?"

"Yes," said Martha, "so do I."

With Lynda as her guide Martha descends to the basement to descend further into the depths of herself. She discovers that what passes for madness is a different, larger way of seeing the interrelatedness of things. This kind of madness can be an enlightenment, a psychological and psychic epiphany. Martha's withdrawal into madness gives her an understanding of her placement and displacement in society. Her inner voices, evil, hating and prophetic, reveal to her what Lessing describes as a vast impersonal sea of energy to which we are all connected.

Martha's quest for self makes her acutely aware of the narrowness of social roles which not only imprison women behind the barbs of a myth that injures both them and their children, but which also labels as "mad" those who appropriate other ways of seeing. It is a label of oppression. In the shaping of the female *Bildungsroman* many writers have sought to reclaim it, as they have done with the mother-myth, making of the state of displacement it embodies a free space, making of it a subversive power with which to explore the self.

Martha ends by going on, trusting now in her capacity to grow and learn and to preserve her hard-won integrity and autonomy. In the "Appendix" to the narrative, we learn that Martha did maintain her inner core after the disintegration of society, and that she ended her days on an isolated island caring for the new and special children who seem to Martha to have transcended the "nightmare repetition" she has struggled against. The society which regenerated may, however, have no place for such visionaries, much as the present one seems to have only limited places for women. The new children are reported to be subnormal, fit only for menial and regimented tasks; cryptically one of them is to be a garden inspector, a gardener perhaps like those who were the guardians of Martha's four-gated city. There is therefore at the conclusion of the novel the possibility of a new individual and a new order, and the awareness also that such growth may not be permitted by a society which refuses to recognise it.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The novel of development portrays a world in which the young woman hero is destined for disappointment.... Every element of her desired world--freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities--inevitably clashes with patriarchal norms. Attempts to develop independence are met with limitation and immurement, training in menial and frustrating tasks, restrictions of the intellect This collision between the hero's evolving self and society's imposed identity appears consistently throughout the history of women's fiction.¹

There is an observable pattern in many novels by women writers who are concerned with a female quest for self. The quest the female hero is engaged with is shaped by her relationship with the mother figure: a relationship which is most often portrayed as debilitating sometimes to the point of denying autonomous selfhood to the daughter hero. In some of these novels, there is the implicit suggestion that the only way for a woman to achieve individuation is to reject or in some way "escape" her mother. This need to escape the mother figure in order to grow is a complex one. It is partly inevitable, in that all children must separate from their parents, from their mothers, in order to find their own places in the world. But the separation is made more difficult for females because they have a strong physical and psychological identification with the mother from whom they are seeking to separate. The little girl appears to herself as both like and not-like. The boundaries of identity may thus be blurred for girls in a way that they are not for boys, who have a strong and positively affirmed image of an other with which to identify.

The mother figure functions in a highly symbolic, almost iconographic way in many of the fictional representations of the female quest. Very often she appears to her daughter more as a symbol of possible social placement than as an individual in her own right. In these instances she is often a monster, sometimes a muse. The mother figure comes to represent for her daughter both her childhood and her potential destiny and is often perceived as an oppressor, as the thwarter of her

¹Annis Pratt, *op. cit.*, p.29.

daughter's quest. There are instances in the fiction wherein the daughter perceives her mother to be an instrument of the social order and a victim of it, herself. But even this awareness does not make her quest easier, her pain less. More often than not, in fact, the hero's mother is dead or absent; the limitations her mother has imposed on her have been internalised, perpetuated, extended--sometimes to extremes.

The female quest for self is concerned not only with the discovery of that union of elements--emotions, thoughts and sensations--that constitute the individuality and identity of a person, but also with the placement of that union in union with her society. But society cannot encompass her individuality; it seeks to deny or destroy it by imposing upon her developing autonomy limitations which are embodied in and administered by the mother. The mother represents the social definition of female adult status; women are ultimately defined by whether or not they are mothers:

The particular poignancy of Mothers and Daughters ... derives from the patriarchal injunction which blames mothers for everything and anything--thereby depreciating Motherhood, while at the same time insisting it is a woman's highest vocation.... Daughters nearly always do not want to be mothers *in the same way*: every daughter determines to do it differently from how her mother did, to do it better. But the fulcrum of patriarchal reproduction is that she has to do it; be a mother or a non-mother, either way trapped in the linguistic and social imperative that a woman be defined in terms of her relationship to mothering.²

It would be very easy to extrapolate from these novels the notion that every failure by a woman to negotiate an autonomous self is entirely her mother's fault. This is certainly the reading of Freudian Psychoanalysis with regard to mother-daughter relationships. But as the terms "mother" and "daughter" themselves denote, they figure as relational concepts: constructed roles in constructed social groupings.³ If the mother figure is then culpable in the denial of her daughter's quest, one may ask whose interests are served, not only in denying the daughter success, but in making the mother appear the villain. One of the difficulties therefore in centering a reclamation of female power and female culture on the mother--daughter relationship is that it can be a relationship formed by and within the patriarchy serving patriarchal interests. Women can become their own most powerful oppressors.

Some of the novels I have examined suggest that the only way of attaining

²Elizabeth Ward, *Father-Daughter Rape*, [London: The Women's Press, 1984], pp.207-208.

³Very often they are roles and groupings willingly acceded to by the individuals immediately involved.

autonomy and self-hood is to break with the mother figure, and thus with the patriarchy which constructs her. It may then be possible, as it was for the hero of *Surfacing*, to re-envision and reclaim the mother-figure as part of a self-affirming myth instead of a self-denying one. It may then be possible, as Jackson attempted to suggest it was for Elisabeth, to start again with a "clean slate". It may then be possible, as it was for Martha, to go on, alone.

Virginia Woolf's admonition that we must think back through our mothers is an important one for feminist scholarship, and one taken to heart in fiction by many heroes of the female quest. Whilst being mindful of the danger of replicating a power relationship that may not wholly serve women's best interests, it may be possible to reframe and reinterpret the mother figure in ways that are more helpful to and encouraging of a female quest for self.

Ideas about self and autonomy are themselves borrowings from the patriarchy. These novels have in varying ways challenged the assumption of many male quest novels that there is a unified, cohesive self to quest for--and that such a quest is worthwhile. A female quest for self appears more particularly concerned with discovering a sense of placement for the self, and in the self. That is to say, the self is conceived of as being more fragmented than it is unified, more changing and changeable than it is constant or even consistent. A quest for self is therefore a quest to locate the self at a particular point in time and in society.

Such a concept of the quest accounts for the close attention paid to temporal orders and for the exploration of the realms of madness as retreat, as refuge. It may also account for the frequent association of the female *Bildungsroman* with the Gothic. For it is part of the formulation of the Gothic that the hero is both victim and hero. The imagery of monsters and ghosts and haunted houses, possessed places and people, evil and savagery, both seen and unseen, lends itself to descriptions of a self divided, thwarted and lost. A Gothic framework provides a "visual form to the fear of self."⁴ And the self, as we have observed in *The Haunting of Hill House* and in *Life Before Man*, is often something to be feared. What if it is too hard to find and maintain? You can retreat into social categories, as Lesje does, or you can, as Eleanor does, choose another kind of death.

The writers I have examined are concerned with an examination of the mother

⁴Ellen Moers, *op. cit.*, p.107.

myth to "the extent to which it perpetuates debilitating stereotypes,"⁵ in some cases they seek also to portray the evasion of "its tragic repetition."⁶

It is important to note that much of the mythologizing of the mother figure is completed by the daughter. As Susan Gubar points out:

The heroines of Lessing and Atwood descend to discover their own complicity. Like Persephone who eats the deathly fruit, these women realise--to their horror--that they have internalised the enemy.⁷

They perpetuate their own imprisonment. It is only when the hero of *Surfacing* steps outside the social order represented by Anna and David that she can recognise her own culpability in her status as victim, and also acknowledge that her mother [and father] had gifts to offer that hitherto she had refused to allow were possible.

I try to think for the first time what it was like to be them: our father, islanding his life, protecting both us and himself ... the effort it must have taken to sustain his illusions of reason and benevolent order, and perhaps he didn't. Our mother collecting the seasons and the weather and her children's faces, the meticulous records that allowed her to omit the other things, the pain and isolation and whatever it was she was fighting against, something in a vanished history I can never know. [*Surfacing*, p.190]

This discovery allows the protagonist to claim not only her power for her self but also responsibility for self-determination.

I have to recant to give up the old belief that I am powerless and that because of it nothing I do will ever hurt anyone. [*Surfacing*, p.191]

Jackson's Eleanor is not capable of acceding to personal responsibility, even in death. Merricat refigures the world in such a way that she is disallowed responsibility and never moves emotionally or intellectually beyond childhood. Connie is trapped by her own inability to separate from their mother into the world according to Merricat and is thus also prohibited from further personal growth and from social placement.

The latter is an important consideration in all of the female quest novels I have examined. The self, self-development, is held to be incomplete unless there is some way in which that self may connect with others. As the protagonist of *Surfacing* discovers, an awareness of one's own power is also an awareness of the

⁵S.Gubar, "Women Writers and the Ancient Myth", in *Women's Studies*, VOL.6, 1979 [London: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1979], p.307.

⁶*ibid.*, p.307.

⁷*ibid.*, p.312.

power one has in interactions with others. Martha does not perceive her quest to probe her own potentiality as being for her "self" alone. When and because she has plumbed her own depths she is able to extend and enrich the lives of those around her.

In this way, the female *Bildungsroman* may often be regarded as Utopian literature. Not [hopefully] because it is concerned with fantasy, but because the quester and the author are concerned with expanding the search for personal definition and fulfillment into the shaping of better relationships, of a better society. Often though the pressure of the society in which these questers live, weights their visions and their souls and so they go nowhere much at all, and find there, only disappointment. As the novels I have examined demonstrate, one of the weights which burdens these questers is the mother figure, in so far as she is the instrument by which socially determined and frequently debilitating roles for women are foisted upon them.

Thus daughters rejects their mothers--and at the same time they long for them. They long for a mother who will show them how to get out of the trap, how to be independent, whole, herself. We long for an acknowledgement of what could be possible between mothers and daughters.⁸

The focus on the mother-daughter relationship in the female *Bildungsroman* is one way of explicating some of the strains that appear in the seams of the genre when the hero is a woman. While the narrative patterns of these novels, as Annis Pratt contends, fit the "usual definition of the [implicitly male] *Bildungsroman*, as based on the concept of *Bildung*, or the ideal of personal fulfillment within a culture,"⁹ there is a difference in the conception and the outcome of the quest dependent on the sex of the quester. Both male and female questers can be alienated from society but a woman chooses to be displaced from a social identity as much as she is "radically alienated by gender-role norms *from the very outset*."¹⁰

Selfhood and social placement would appear to be mutually antithetical for the female quester. Martha Quest may achieve personal integration but only in a new society--a very isolated one--and only after the rest of civilisation has been destroyed. The female *Bildungsroman* is the manifestation of, to use Brecht's

⁸Elizabeth Ward, *op. cit.*, pp.207-208.

⁹Annis Pratt, *op. cit.*, p.36.

¹⁰*ibid.*, p.36.

phrase, "*Verfremdungs-effect*," in that what is discovered is one's alienation, one's distance and displacement from culture and society.

The mother-figure is a myth; one that is crucial to the development of female identity. Examining the myth enables one to point to "the discrepancy between how [a woman] experiences herself and how she has been defined by her culture."¹¹ The myth is a male institution, which confines women to a subordinate position in society and makes a women responsible for the socialisation of her children so that she becomes the instigator of her daughter's oppression, the enforcer of patriarchal norms. This mythology is taken up by the daughter and made a part of her perception not only of her mother but of herself. The images of female selfhood her mother represents, whether she chooses to reject or accept them, shape her view of her own potential.

Most often therefore, like her mother before her, and her mother before her, the daughter is not equipped with the skills or the fortitude to make the choice, and it appears that a massive reorganisation of society has to take place before they do not have to make it at all.

The mythology of the mother can be re-invented, reclaimed, so that the daughter is able to see her mother as something other than an oppressor. She can be, as she was for the protagonist of *Surfacing*, a muse. But it seems for the majority of daughter/questers, the mother figure is too entangled in social norms which seek to deny them individuation to play an affirming role in their search. When faced with the problem of the mother figure, women have three options, according to Naomi Goldenburg. They can conform to the patriarchal version, seek out their own version or redefine the term.¹² The ways in which the female hero deals with the mother myth shape particular elements of plot, characterisation, image and tone in the fictional quest, the mother-daughter struggle appearing as part of the struggle to establish identity. On the daughter's part she must begin to re-examine her mother in person and in myth, turning her internalised medusa into a muse, or even simply acknowledging her as a human being.

The traditional ways of seeing and portraying women are no longer appropriate. The female *Bildungsroman* is being reshaped to include a challenge to patriarchal myths about a woman's place, as personified by the mother, and a

¹¹S. Gubar, *op. cit.*, p.302.

¹²Naomi Goldenburg, "A Feminist Critique of Jung", *Signs*, VOL.2 NO.2 [Winter, 1976].

challenge to the placement of the mother as the agent of cultural oppression upon her daughter. As part of the reflexive nature of such a challenge, new directions have emerged within the framework of the genre, encompassing the Gothic, and pointing towards Utopian fiction. *Surfacing* and *Four Gated City* suggest some ways of deflating and reconstructing the mother myth that may allow for new possibilities in the fictional representation of women's experience of questing, and more particularly, new signification for the mother in the daughter's quest for self.

I have been sleeping through a long cold
in the hollow branch of my mother.
It is time now to splash through
the thawed ice.

Miriam Palmer,
from "Raccoon Poem".

Appendix: List of Quest Novels Featuring Mother-Daughter Relationships

Some Quest novels written this century by women examining mother-daughter relationships as a substantial theme or sub-theme.

A more substantial bibliography of women's writing on the mother-daughter theme may be found in Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner, ed. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*.

My purpose here is to suggest material not included in their listing, although there are several overlaps, and to focus specifically on twentieth-century writers, especially those of Australian and New Zealand origin. This appendix is also meant to serve as an adjunct to the selected bibliography to indicate primary sources that were consulted, but not discussed in the preceding thesis. Like all such efforts, it is incomplete.

Alice Adams	<i>Families and Survivors</i>
Lisa Alther	<i>Kinflicks</i>
	<i>Original Sins</i>
Margaret Atwood	<i>Surfacing</i>
	<i>Lady Oracle</i>
	<i>Life Before Man</i>
Elizabeth Bowen	<i>The Death of the Heart</i>
E. M. Broner	<i>Her Mothers</i>
Joy Cowley	<i>Nest in a Falling Tree</i>
Margaret Drabble	<i>Jerusalem the Golden</i>
	<i>The Millstone</i>
Jean Devaney	<i>The Butcher Shop</i>
Stephanie Dowrick	<i>Running Backwards Over Sand</i>
Marguerite Duras	<i>The Lover</i>
Janet Frame	<i>Owls Do Cry</i>
	<i>A State of Siege</i>
Marilyn French	<i>The Women's Room</i>
	<i>The Bleeding Heart</i>
Miles Franklin	<i>My Brilliant Career</i>
Helen Garner	<i>Monkey Grip</i>
	<i>The Children's Bach</i>
	<i>Honour &</i>
	<i>Other People's Children</i> (Novellas)
Penelope Gilliat	<i>A State of Change</i>
	<i>Sunday Bloody Sunday</i>
Ellen Glasgow	<i>The Woman Within</i>
Shirley Jackson	<i>We Have Always Lived in the Castle</i>
	<i>The Bird's Nest</i>
	<i>Hangsaman</i>

	<i>The Sundial</i>
	<i>Come Along With Me</i>
	<i>The Haunting of Hill House</i>
	as well as many of her short stories, especially "Louisa, Please Come Home"
Sue Kaufman	<i>Diary of a Mad Housewife</i>
Maxine Hong Kingston	<i>The Woman Warrior</i>
Doris Lessing	<i>The Golden Notebook</i>
	<i>Memoirs of a Survivor</i>
	<i>The Summer before Dark</i>
	<i>The Children of Violence Sequence</i>
Rosamund Lehmann	<i>The Ballad and the Source</i>
	<i>The Echoing Grave</i>
Alice Munro	<i>Lives of Girls and Women</i>
Anais Nin	<i>Under a Glass Bell</i>
	<i>Ladders to Fire</i>
Ruth Park	<i>Poor Man's Orange</i>
	<i>Harp in the South</i>
Sylvia Plath	<i>The Bell Jar</i>
Marge Piercy	<i>Woman on the Edge of Time</i>
	<i>Vida</i>
	<i>Small Changes</i>
Dorothy Richardson	<i>Pilgrimage</i>
Michelle Roberts	<i>A Piece of the Night</i>
Christina Stead	<i>The Man Who Loved Children</i>
Vita Sackville-West	<i>All Passion Spent</i>
Cora Sandel	<i>Alberta and Jacob</i>
	<i>Crane's Cafe</i>
Gertrude Stein	<i>Three Lives</i>
Virginia Woolf	<i>The Voyage Out</i>
	<i>Night and Day</i>
	<i>To the Lighthouse</i>
Alice Walker	<i>The Color Purple</i>
	<i>Meridian</i>

Also short stories by Barbara Baynton, Katherine Mansfield, Grace Paley, Tillie Olsen.

In relation to the theme of the female quest it is also interesting to think about motherless daughters: eg. Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, Dorothea Brooke, Emma; and Anne Elliot.

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